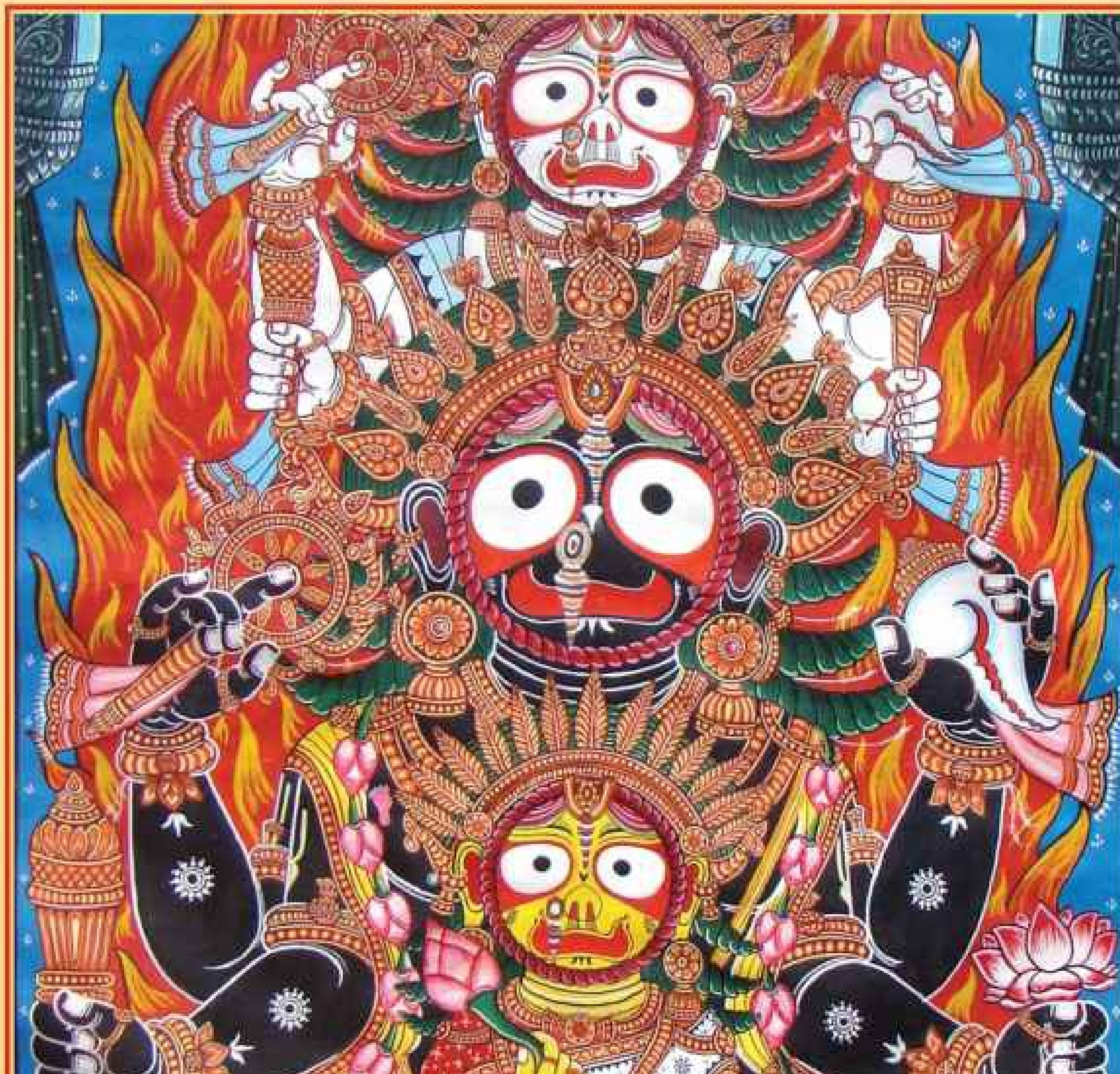
The Agni and The Ecstasy

(SATYARAJA DASA)



Collected Essays of Steven J. Rosen

FOREWORD BY RADHANATH SWAMI

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The Collected Essays
of Steven J. Rosen
(Satyaraja Dasa)

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Foreword

by His Holiness Radhanath Swami

Over the years, I, like many, have had the good fortune to read the works of my dear friend Steven Rosen or, as I know him, Satyaraja Dasa, and have been enriched by their contents. I have sincerely appreciated his books and his articles, whether in Back to Godhead magazine or in a host of yoga journals and academic publications, and I find them to not only clearly represent nonsectarian, spiritual philosophy and the lineage to which he aligns himself, the Gaudiya Vaishnava sampradaya (tradition), but also to be informative, clear, and accessible for a modern audience. He brings to life such subjects as yoga, vegetarianism, animal rights, bhakti-yoga, environmental concerns, social interaction, comparative religion, the soul and reincarnation, infusing them with his vast knowledge, contemporary style, and educated voice.

It is with great pleasure that I write the Foreword for The Agni and the Ecstasy, for here one will find, arguably, the best of his writing endeavors. Articles in this volume, most of them previously published, include the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita, Srimad Bhagavatam, Chaitanya Charitamrita, and more, all presented through Satyaraja's considerable intellect and unique humor, aid in making the teachings of these masterworks applicable and realizable for a modern audience. Ancient texts such as these hold invaluable keys to universal truth. When a knowledgeable and gifted person with communication skills, like Satyaraja, uses his talents to share these truths, he provides an easy understanding of this timeless wisdom, not just for Vaishnava devotees but for people in general. Having imbibed the compassionate spirit of Srila Prabhupada, his beloved guru, and having dedicated his life to uplifting humanity through transcendental knowledge, Satyaraja is specially empowered to reach our hearts. We can rejoice upon the release of this volume of his collected articles.

A Note from the Editor

Since these essays were not originally written to be published as a single volume, some repetition of terminology, explanatory phrases and other material is inevitable. I have removed some of these when I felt it was appropriate. However, some have been retained, so that the reader may either choose to read through the essays in the order given, or else pick and choose according to his own interests. For the former, I have attempted, as much as possible, to give the essays a logical sense of progression so that one will find some sense of unity while reading straight through.

We have occasionally used abbreviations for the most commonly referenced Vaishnava scriptures in the text: Bhagavad Gita (BG), Srimad Bhagavatam (SB) and Chaitanya Charitamrita (CC). These are always followed by volume, chapter and verse numbers. All quotations from the works and translations of A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada are taken from the standard editions published by the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, to whom the copyright for all of Prabhupada's writings belongs.

References to Web sites were verified as being correct and available during April and May 2012.

John B. Morgan IV
Bangalore, India
May 2012

Introduction

Over the last twenty-or-so years, many readers — friends and strangers — have encouraged me to compile my articles into a single volume. Some of these articles appeared in Back to Godhead, the magazine of the Hare Krishna movement; others have appeared in the Journal of Vaishnava Studies, various yoga and health magazines, Facebook, and so on. Most of these were written within the last decade, although a few go back as far as the 1980s. A selection of interviews that I felt had something to say are included as well.

I was at first reluctant. Some of these pieces are scholarly, adhering to academic conventions; others are written in a more popular, journalistic style. In other words, the articles are somewhat uneven, for they were, when originally written, directed toward various audiences, at different times in my writing career.

But as I looked over the material, it occurred to me that, rather than being a weakness, this unevenness might actually be a strength. In other words, there is something in this book for everybody. If one leans toward academia and intellectual approaches to spirituality, one will appreciate the articles included here that are informative, well-researched, and conveyed with an authoritative tone. On the other hand, if the reader prefers essays that entertain and arouse emotions — that speak to one's internal spiritual quest and a personal search for answers — then there are also pieces that address those particular needs.

The subjects covered are vast. Usually, I set out to write articles that speak to my own personal concerns. If I have a question about a particular aspect of the tradition, I sit down and do the research, and then I write a summary of what I've learned. In this way, I crystallize the information in my own head and heart, and, hopefully, by writing it down, help others to do the same.

My thanks must go to numerous people, but because these essays were written over the course of many years, there are too many to mention. However, I will single out two who play a central role in my endeavors: my spiritual teacher, His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, who inspired most of these pieces with his life and work, and my dear friend Radhanath Swami, who so graciously wrote the Foreword despite his busy schedule. Both of these teachers are spiritual jewels, whose shining examples continue to motivate and animate my various devotional writing projects.

Steven J. Rosen (Satyaraja Dasa)
May 16, 2012

Part I: Vaishnava Philosophy and Scripture

What Exactly is "Vedic"?

Walk into any yoga center or Indic temple and you're bound to hear the words "Veda" and "Vedic" used repeatedly. Practitioners and devotees refer to "Vedic art," "Vedic scriptures," "Vedic culture," "Vedic dress" — Vedic this and Vedic that. They use words related to Veda as often as the average person uses the words sex and money.

Just what does "Vedic" mean? And where does "the Veda" come from?

The word Veda can be traced to the Sanskrit root vid, which means "to know" or "knowledge." It is related to the words "wit" and "wisdom" from the German; "idea" (originally widea) from the Greek; and "video" from the Latin. (One who knows, sees the truth; hence: video.)

So Veda refers to any abiding knowledge. In that sense, all sacred texts are Vedic. Srila Prabhupada writes:

> The word Veda means 'book of knowledge.' There are many books of knowledge, which vary according to the country, population, environment, etc. In India, the books of knowledge are referred to as the Vedas. In the West, they are called the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Muslims accept the Koran. What is the purpose for all of these books of knowledge? They are to train us to understand our position as pure soul. (Beyond Birth and Death, p. 7)

These are among the broadest definitions of Veda. In a more narrow sense — and the one with which most scholars are familiar — Veda refers to the four samhitas (holy books) compiled in India by Vyasadeva, an incarnation of Krishna, some five thousand years ago (according to tradition). These books have an oral history that dates much further back. In fact, the texts themselves say that the knowledge contained in them emanated directly from the body of the Lord. As Bhagavad Gita (3.15) puts it, "The Vedas are directly manifested from the infallible Supreme Personality of Godhead."

The four samhitas started out as one lengthy work, but then Vyasadeva divided them into the Rig Veda (the Veda of sacred sounds), the Sama Veda (the Veda of melodies), the Yajur Veda (the Veda of rituals), and the Atharva Veda (the Veda of incantations). These four books have their own corollary works, called Brahmanas (treatises dealing with the technicalities of sacrifices) and Aranyakas (forest treatises for renunciants who go off into the wilderness to fulfill vows).

Also generally included in the Vedic canon are the 108 Upanishads, which are elaborate philosophical explanations of the four Vedas. The Upanishads, say the ancient texts themselves, were revealed by Krishna to self-realized sages and are thus called sruti, or "that which is heard." This puts them in the same category as the four Vedas and their corollaries.

Yet throughout the Vedic literature are indications — affirmed by great sages — that other works that would come after them, while not Vedic in the narrowest sense, can also be included within the vast gamut of traditional Vedic knowledge. The Chandogya Upanishad (7.1.4), for example, describes the Puranas and Itihasas, which I'll define later, as "the fifth Veda." And the Brhadaranyaka Upanishad (2.4.10) informs us, "The Rig Veda, the Yajur Veda, the Sama Veda, the Atharva Veda, and histories such as the Mahabharata and the Puranas are all breathed out by the Absolute Truth. Just as one's breath comes easily, these arise from the Supreme Brahman without any effort on His part." These two texts offer proofs that are especially important, since they are not the later literature attempting to bolster their own status — they are part of Veda proper, bestowing validity upon the so-called "later literature."

The great Thirteenth-century Vaishnava teacher Madhvacharya, too, affirms that much of the traditional literature of India can be considered part of the Veda. In his Vedanta-sutra (2.1.6) commentary, he writes: "The Rig Veda, the Yajur Veda, the Sama Veda, the Atharva Veda, the Mahabharata, the Pancaratra, and the original Ramayana are all considered Vedic literature.... The Vaishnava supplements — the Puranas — are also Vedic literature."

The writings coming after the Upanishads and the four Vedas are known as smrti ("that which is remembered," as opposed to the Vedic sruti). They include the Itihasas (epics) and the Puranas (histories). The Itihasas are the epic poems Mahabharata (110,000 verses) and the Ramayana (over 50,000). There are eighteen main Puranas (including the Srimad Bhagavatam), many Upapuranas (lesser Puranas), and numerous regional Puranas that arose as part of local traditions, some of which are more authoritative than others.

Also included within the Vedic literature are the Sutras (books of concise philosophical statements), the Vedangas (auxiliary sciences connected with Vedic study), and the Upavedas

(sciences not directly related to Vedic study). The Sutras include the Srauta-sutra, the Grha-sutra, the Kalpa-sutra, the Dharma-sutra, the Sulva-sutra, and most important, the Vedanta-sutra. The six Vedangas are Siksa (phonetics), Chandas (meter), Vyakarana (grammar), Nirukta (etymology), Jyotisa (astronomy), and Kalpa (ritual). Among the Upavedas are Ayurveda (holistic medicine), Gandharva-veda (music and dance), Dhanurveda (warfare), and Sthapatya-veda (architecture).

Tradition holds that any literature in pursuance of the Vedic version is just as important as the Vedas themselves. These include such books as Hari-bhakti-sudhodaya, Harivamsa, Brahma-yamala, and hundreds of others. Finally, we can add the many writings of self-realized acharyas (teachers who have been authorized by those masters who came before them, known as the disciplic succession), such as Krsnadasa Kaviraja Gosvami's Sri Chaitanya Caritamrta and the many books of the six Gosvamis, Lord Chaitanya's chief disciples.

The King of Books

Because these other writings bring out the essence of the original Veda, they are, in a sense, more important than the original Veda. Take Srimad Bhagavatam, for example. According to tradition, this profound revelation was originally given by God to Brahma, the first created being, at the dawn of creation. Brahma conveyed the essence of the knowledge to Narada, and Narada passed it on to Vyasa, who, as previously mentioned, took the eternal wisdom of the Veda and divided it into four distinct sections.

What I did not mention, however, is that after this, Vyasa summarized the Vedic knowledge into a huge volume of terse codes known as Vedanta-sutra. But after doing so, He became despondent. He felt that in compiling the Vedic literature, he had neglected to truly focus on the Absolute Truth. His suspicion was confirmed by his spiritual master, Narada, who told him that he had indeed overlooked the central point of reality and would be satisfied only if he were to directly describe the name, fame, form, and pastimes of Krishna, the Supreme Personality of Godhead. Heeding the advice of his guru, Vyasa compiled Srimad Bhagavatam, whose verses describe it as "the king of books," "the spotless Purana," and "the mature fruit of the Vedic tree of knowledge." It is also considered the natural commentary on the Vedanta-sutra, containing its essence.

For most followers of the Vedic tradition, the "later" or "non-Vedic" texts are more "Vedic" than the Vedas themselves. Jiva Gosvami, whom the followers of Lord Chaitanya consider the foremost of all Vedic philosophers, emphasizes this point in his Tattva-sandarbha (17.4), where he quotes the Skanda Purana (Prabhasa-khanda 2.93): "O Brahmins, one who is fully conversant with the four Vedas, the six Vedangas, and the Upanishads, but who has not also studied the Itihasas or the Puranas, is not actually learned in Vedic knowledge." Why? Because, according to Jiva, the Puranas and Itihasas are superior to the Vedas: "The superiority of the Puranas and Itihasas is described in the following passage from the Narada Purdna, where Lord Shiva is quoted as saying, "O beautiful Parvati, I consider the Puranas and Itihasas superior to the Vedas, for whatever truths are present in the Vedas are also explained in these ancient works. Of this there is no doubt.'" (16.11) Clearly, the Vaishnava tradition considers all supplementary Vedic literature indispensable when studying the Vedas.

Most Comprehensive

The Vedic literature — in this more inclusive sense — is the most comprehensive scriptural tradition known to man. It contains information on everything from medicine and farming to the nature of time on the other planets, both upper and lower; from techniques of yoga and meditation to household tips and recipes for tasty vegetarian dishes; from detailed expositions of how governments should be organized to masterful instructions for building and decorating a temple or a residence. The verses in each of the thousands of Vedic texts conform to strict rules of poetic form and meter. The Vedas contain drama, history, and complex philosophy, as well as simple lessons of etiquette. Military protocol, the use of musical instruments, biographies of great saints and sages of the past — these are but a few of the subjects one finds in the Vedas.

It is no wonder, then, that devotees of Eastern thought use the terms Veda and Vedic as if the words were going out of style. By drawing on the vast Vedic heritage, today associated mainly with India, devotees conjure up a culture so advanced and so sophisticated that it is still respected by scholars, politicians, swamis, yogis, and anyone privy to its elaborate teachings. We still find people in India

today who defend their points in a debate — religious or political — by citing Vedic authority. Devotees in ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness) cite Vedic evidence in that way, too, and in many other ways as well. And why not? They are drawing on a tradition that, for thousands of years, has been followed by billions of people who have sought material and spiritual advancement.

Conclusion

There is an esoteric tradition that elucidates the place of the Vedas in relation to the other sacred texts of India, and this revolves around the words prabhu ("master"), sakha ("friend"), and priya ("dear" or "beloved"). The Vedas themselves (the four samhitas and the Upanishads), the sruti, are known as prabhu, indicating that, if one is to follow these texts properly, they should be treated as one's "master" — that is to say, one must accept Vedic teachings fully, following the specific rituals they prescribe with full enthusiasm and without hesitation. For the mass of people, this is simply not possible, nor is it appealing. Next comes the smriti literature (i.e., the Puranas, the Epics, and so on) — these are more user-friendly (sakha). They explain what the Vedas really mean and allow one entrance into their mysteries. Finally, we have the beautiful poetry (kavya) of the tradition and the writings of the acharyas. This is priya in the sense that it is "most-dear" — it provides esoteric understanding and conquers the heart, allowing one to truly imbibe the message of the Vedas.

Is God a Verb, or Something More?

Over the last few years, the phrase "God is a verb" has repeatedly appeared in my midst. And whenever it does, I have to say, I greet it with mixed emotions, wondering what it actually means.

Recently, I decided to look into it, eventually locating three sources that make direct use of this concept:

(1) Rabbi David Cooper says this:

> The closest we can come to thinking about God is as a process rather than a being. We can think of it as "be-ing," as verb rather than noun. Perhaps it would help us understand this better if we renamed God. We might call it God-ing, as a process, rather than God, which suggests a noun. This idea was developed by Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, who goes further and explains that the kind of verb that represents God-ing is different from the ones we have in our ordinary language. Most of our verbs are considered transitive, which require a direct object, or intransitive, those that do not. He suggests that God-ing is a mutually interactive verb, one which entails an interdependency between two subjects, each being the object for the other.[1]

By his own admission, then, the idea is traceable to

(2) Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi. Cooper adapted the idea from a predecessor, who also happened to be his mentor.

(3) Finally, there is a series of statements from Buckminster Fuller (1895–1983), from whose famous quote the idea, as such, may have sprouted. Contemplating his own earthly experience, Fuller writes, "I live on Earth at present, and I don't know what I am. I know that I am not a category. I am not a thing — a noun. I seem to be a verb, an evolutionary process — an integral function of the universe." And then Fuller sums up, specifically about God: "God, to me, it seems, is a verb, not a noun, proper or improper."[2]

In Sanskrit texts, God is said to be non-different from His divine names, all of which come from verbal roots, indicating that, at least in this sense, God is a verb: the name Krishna ("the All-Attractive One"), for example, comes from the verbal root krish ("to draw near," "to pull toward"); Vishnu ("the All-Pervading One") comes from the verbal root vish ("to enter," or "to pervade"); and Radha ("the one who worships best") comes from the verbal root radh ("to succeed, accomplish, finish").

As I contemplate it more fully, the entire notion of "God as a verb" smacks of Process Theology, a school of thought conceived by Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947) and developed by Charles Hartshorne (1897–2000). To make a long story short, these philosophers proposed that God might be seen as process rather than substance. In other words, He is constantly changing, as He includes our ever-expanding reality within His overall nature.

Though there are immediate theological problems with this line of thinking — God, by definition, is eternally perfect, and beyond any need for change — Process Theology is appealing in that it speaks to an observable phenomenon in nature: reality is change. We see it all around us, and so it must exist, in some way, in our source, in God, for we are created in His image. In other words, we can evaluate the nature of our source by observing our own nature. And our own nature is full of change, motion, flux: these are fundamental facts of life. This is true of all reality, says Process Theology, including ourselves and God. In this way, we can understand, too, that we are like verbs. We are in motion, in flux. As is God.

Students of Vaishnavism will immediately see a flaw in this line of thinking: change and fluctuation clearly exist in us, no doubt, but only in our bodily, mental, or intellectual existence, not in our actual, spiritual existence. That is to say, in the illusory "reality" of the material world, there is change and growth all around us — and in us. But this is not who or what we really are. We are the spiritual element, changeless and perfect, like God.[3]

Furthermore, according to Vedic texts, God is "big" perfect, and we are "little" perfect. What that means is that God is like a goldmine, whereas, comparatively speaking, we are like little particles of gold, or He is like a great ocean, while we are comparable to little drops of water. In other words,

our perfection is like God's in quality but not in quantity. Ancient India's wisdom texts tell us that this is the distinction between God and the living being. And this is our position eternally, without change.

But let us suspend judgment on Process Theology for the moment, and on whether or not God is a verb.

When we look at the Western religious tradition, with which we might be more familiar, there is another way in which we might see God as a verb, that is, as the embodiment of Love, or that active principle in love itself. Along these lines, Thomas Aquinas described God as "a pure act of love" and St. Bonaventure said that God is "self-diffusive love."[4] Ultimately, we have the First Letter of John, which says it plainly: "God is love" (1 John 4:8). In other words, we are not necessarily talking about a person who loves, but of love itself in all its manifestations.

When I think in these terms, I must admit, there is a part of me that becomes a bit indignant, and I feel the need to "rescue God" from the hands of those who would de-personalize Him, obliterating His divine personality. It brings to mind the Mayavadis of India, an impersonalist school that seeks to divest God of His personhood and put Him beyond the reach of human understanding. But if God is not a person, then where is the question of love — who loves, and to whom might our love be given? Human nature itself thus instigates the urge to understand the relation of substance and attribute, cause and effect, subject and predicate. We naturally want to know God's relationship to the world and to other individuals. Vaishnava theology supplies satisfying answers to these questions; Mayavada philosophy does not. This is because a relationship presupposes two entities that interact. Mayavada presupposes no "other," no entity with whom one might enter into a relationship. In other words, to interact, to love, two entities must be different, even if they are also, in some abstract sense, one.

Once this is understood, we can, in a new light, think about the Christian proclamation that God is love. He is, in fact, both lover and love itself, both noun and verb. This sits well with the entire notion of bhakti ("devotion"), for Krishna (God) is described as non-different from the process by which He is attained, and non-different from His holy name, too, which is the main facilitator of that process. One reaches Krishna by chanting His name.

In Vaishnava texts, the entire path of bhakti-yoga is compared to the growth of a garden "creeper" (bhakti-lata), which must be watered to mature and to blossom. Bhakti, in this sense, is a verb. Starting as a seed planted in the heart through initiation and the instructions of one's preceptor. It is to be watered regularly by the practice of hearing and chanting Krishna's names and glories. In this way, the creeper of devotion grows to the point where it lifts the practitioner out of the material world and into Krishna's spiritual kingdom, where one can then engage in His loving service more fully. Bhakti is thus the means and end, starting in the material world and culminating in the Supreme destination.

Interestingly, His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (1896–1977), perhaps the foremost authority on bhakti and Krishna devotion in the modern era, consciously translated bhakti as "devotional service" as opposed to merely "devotion," as most people translate it. By doing so, he was making a clear statement: love is not passive. It is not simply lip-service: "Oh, I love you so much." No. Real love means action. If you love someone, you want to render service; you want to do something for them. Ultimately, love is a verb.

At the end of the day, though, I would say that the "God is a verb" people would be more on target if they augmented their understanding in the following way: God is not merely a verb; He's a person, too. If He is everything, He is both noun and verb, and all other grammatical components as well. And while He includes all of this, He is, inconceivably, so much more than we can imagine. He is everything, and he also stands outside of everything. This is not, in fact, a grammatical issue, but a theological one.

When contemplating God as a verb, people want to see God as action, or, we might say, as some form of energy — a good deed, perhaps. This is understandable, for in this way God is something tangible, something people can see. This harkens to the notion that God is love itself, as we discussed above — the de-personalized, pure act of a giving soul. But He is much more than all that. He is love, the source of love, and the Person who loves better than anyone else. He is, indeed, Krishna, the Supreme Personality of Godhead.

Defining the Divine, East and West: Conceptions of God in the Bhagavad Gita

"The Bhagavad Gita teaches a pantheistic view of God," he said, his confidence and years of learning clear from his authoritative tone. "The massive vishvarupa — Krishna's universal form, which encompasses all material phenomena, including time — tells us much about God in the Gita."

His friend, another scholar of some renown, seemed to disagree, and at this point I decided to eavesdrop: "The Gita goes beyond pantheism — it shows us how to perceive God in all things. The Tenth Chapter, especially, shows us how Krishna is the superlative exemplar in seventy categories, and how He exists in the perceivable world." A third colleague gave his considered opinion as well: "The Gita ultimately teaches bhakti, devotion to Krishna, the Supreme Personal Deity. In this sense, it is not unlike the great monotheistic traditions of the West. I think you've both missed the point."

As I sat back and listened, I noted that all three scholars were correct, each in their own way. I deeply considered their individual perspectives, and I realized something: the Gita has it all!

In the West, theologians tend to speak of the Divine in three distinct ways, using the terms pantheism, panentheism, and monotheism, with a few variations in between. That is to say, Western theology speaks of God as (1) impersonal, or as being diffused throughout all that we see, and even beyond what we see; (2) as existing within everything, and everything existing within Him; or (3) as a Supreme Being, omnipotent, omniscient, and all the rest.

Those familiar with the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita will immediately recognize the correlation between the above-mentioned conceptions of God and Brahman, Paramatma, and Bhagavan, the three levels of Godhead expressed most succinctly in the Srimad Bhagavatam: "Learned transcendentalists who know the Absolute Truth call this nondual substance Brahman, Paramatma, and Bhagavan." (1.2.11)

Pantheism/Brahman

Pantheism equates God with nature, saying that He exists as everything and that everything is God. In Greek, pan means all, and theos means God. According to this view, the universe, including all matter and energy, is identical with a metaphysical reality that is more than just the sum of its parts. The pantheistic "God," both impersonal and non-theistic (if we consider the usual sense of theism), is entirely immanent, if only we had the eyes to see it.

The doctrine of pantheism often goes further, too, espousing "a belief that every existing entity is only one Being, and that all other forms of reality are either modes (or appearances) of it or identical with it."[5] This is clearly a Western articulation of God as Brahman.

The Rig Veda (10.90.4) describes Brahman as a transcendent reality, an otherworldly force that subsists as an impersonal divinity. As the Purusha-sukta, the Primeval Lord, Brahman expanded a portion of His very self into the created world, where He exists, without personality or form, as its essence. This is perhaps the earliest reference to pantheism — even if it doesn't use that word — in any religious literature, East or West. In fact, the Vedic literature repeatedly tells us that the Lord is both tripada-vibhuti and ekapada-vibhuti, indicating that He manifests three-fourths of His splendor as the spiritual world proper, and the additional one-fourth as His expanded energies in the material world.

In the Gita, one can find hints of pantheism in the Seventh Chapter, where Krishna identifies Himself with varieties of material phenomena: He is the taste of water, the light of the Sun and the Moon, the sound in ether, the ability in man, and so on. A closer look, however, shows that these are manifestations of His energy, and He stands quite apart from them. Still, He does say that He is, in a sense, everything that exists (vasudevah sarvam iti), and the Gita's Ninth Chapter tends to confirm this fact.

Again in Chapter Ten, the Lord elucidates His all-pervasive nature, identifying Himself with the best of everything in existence: He is Siva, the ocean, the lion, Garuda, the Himalayas, the letter A, inexhaustible time, Brahma, truth itself, victory, adventure, and so on. But clearly, again, this is not all there is to Krishna, and He says so Himself by describing all of the above, and more, as a "mere

indication" of His glory (esa tuddesatah prokto) and "but a spark of His splendor" (mama tejo'msa-sambhavan).

A pantheistic view seems somewhat more apparent in the Gita's Eleventh Chapter, wherein the Lord reveals His Universal Form (visvarupa). Details of this form appear in the Srimad Bhagavatam's Second Canto, particularly in Chapters One and Six. Here we learn that, "the gigantic manifestation of the phenomenal material world as a whole is the personal body of the Absolute Truth…" (2.1.24), and that, "the sphere of outer space constitutes His eye pits, and the eyeball is the sun as the power of seeing. His eyelids are both the day and night, and in the movements of His eyebrows, Lord Brahma and similar personalities reside." (2.1.31) In this way, the Bhagavatam goes on to deliver a most elaborate meditation on the Absolute, allowing practitioners to virtually "see" Him in the material world.

However, the Bhagavatam (1.3.30) is clear: "The conception of the virat universal form of the Lord, as appearing in the material world, is imaginary. It is to enable the less intelligent [and neophytes] to adjust to the idea of the Lord's having form. But factually the Lord has no material form." Thus, the universal manifestation of the Supreme is meant to take practitioners from an impersonal understanding of the Absolute, or Brahman realization, to a more developed, personal conception of Lord, and to help them realize that while He has no material form, He does have a spiritual form.

Because this universal vision of the Lord equates God with the phenomenal world — that is, as being wholly amalgamated with, or inseparable from manifested, visible nature — it is a form of pantheism, and one obviously needs to go further to understand God's spiritual nature. A pantheist who fails to look beyond the complex and majestic manifestations of matter, to see their all-attractive, transcendent, personal source, may even be regarded as atheistic, for such an individual tends to overlook a personal Divinity.

That being said, a more liberal view of pantheism can also be found in the teachings of the Gita. As Srila Prabhupada writes:

> Pantheism in its higher status does not permit the student to form an impersonal conception of the Absolute Truth, but it extends the conception of the Absolute Truth into the field of the so-called material energy. Everything created by the material energy can be dovetailed with the Absolute by an attitude of service, which is the essential part of [the] living energy. The pure devotee of the Lord knows the art of converting everything into its spiritual existence by this service attitude, and only in that devotional way can the theory of pantheism be perfected. (Srimad Bhagavatam 2.1.20, purport)

Here, Prabhupada suggests that the pantheistic perspective may be an imperfect preliminary stage that can lead to a more mature or complete realization of the Absolute Truth as something far greater than can be found in material nature. This correlates with the tradition's view of Brahman realization, too, which is a low-rung, impersonal conception of the Divine.

Panentheism/Paramatma

While the Gita views pantheism as immature or incomplete, it more readily embraces a panentheistic view, seeing all things as imbued with God's presence and all things as being present in God as well. For the sake of clarity: as opposed to pantheism, which sees God AS everything, panentheism sees God IN everything or, sometimes, everything in God. The word is used in both ways.[6]

The term panentheism itself is attributed to German philosopher Karl Christian Friedrich Krause (1781–1832), who wanted to reconcile monotheism and pantheism. Indeed, from a Vaishnava point of view, panentheism has some redeeming features. For example, Krishna says, "I exist within everything as the Supersoul and outside of everything in My all-pervading feature." (SB 11.15.35-36). Further, the Brahma-samhita (5.35) tells us that, "All universes exist in Him (Krishna) and He is present in His fullness in every atom." If this is not panentheism, what is? Krishna is within everything, and everything is within Him.

Now, in order for Him to fit within everything, He would have to be smaller than the smallest, and for everything to fit within Him, He would have to be larger than the largest. He would have to simultaneously be both, inconceivably. In fact, this is precisely how He is described in numerous scriptural passages: the Svetashvatara Upanishad (3.9), for example, tells us that Krishna is smaller than the smallest and larger than the largest, and it says it in exactly those words (anoraniyan mahato mahiyan). The Gita itself tells us that God is both the smallest (anor aniyamsam, 8.9) and the greatest

(vibhum, 10.12), in terms of size.

Thus, the Bhagavad Gita (9.4) reveals that all beings are in Krishna (mat-sthani-sarva-bhutani), and this is certainly a form of panentheism. The alternate side of the same concept, that God is in all, brings us to the subject of Paramatma.

Panentheism, in this case, might be considered a Western equivalent for Paramatma realization, wherein one views Krishna (or His expansion, Vishnu) as all-pervading, existing within every human heart and, indeed, within every atom. This is a more localized, personal feature of the Lord, as compared with the pantheistic Brahman conception. But all is not so easy.

There are differences between panentheism, as commonly understood, and the Vaishnava conception of Paramatma. While the similarity of "God in all" certainly exists in both, Paramatma goes much further, putting a "face" on panentheism's God. The critical factor here is FORM. Both the Gita and the Bhagavatam (2.2.9-11), especially, are quite specific about Vishnu as He appears in every atom: "He has four hands carrying a lotus, a wheel of a chariot, a conchshell, and a club, respectively. His mouth expresses His happiness. His eyes spread like the petals of a lotus, and His garments, yellowish like the saffron of a kadamba flower, are bedecked with valuable jewels, and He wears a glowing headdress and earrings." The description actually gets quite elaborate.

Moreover, while the panentheistic view holds that everything is in God and sometimes that God is in everything, it is never quite clear about the relationship between the God we perceive in nature and the Transcendent Being who is the source of all we see.[7] The Bhagavatam and the Gita give us a much more developed, or, shall we say, sophisticated idea about this source.

Those Vaishnava texts tell us that Krishna is the root of all Divine manifestations, and that Paramatma is an emanation from that original source, partaking fully of His transcendent nature. The omnipotent Supreme Person has the ability to reproduce His essential being by appearing in "an extended personal form of Himself," as Prabhupada describes Paramatma. Thus, if we may offer new terminology to the Western theological tradition, let us call Paramatma a form of "Personal Extensionism." This differs both from the view that God is in one sense identical with all that is (pantheism), and that he is impersonally immanent in all things we see (panentheism). But this is still not monotheism proper.

Monotheism/Bhagavan

When scholars talk about "the three great monotheistic traditions," they are usually NOT talking about Vaishnavism or the tradition of the Bhagavad Gita. Rather, they are talking about Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. However, if they would look just a little beneath the surface, they would perhaps find the earliest monotheistic tradition in the history of religion.

True, one should be cautious when applying the terms from one set of religious traditions to another with its own history, insights, and ways of thinking about spirituality. People who identify with the Judeo-Christian tradition have very particular ideas in mind when they refer to monotheism, and that should be respected. The same might be said about the terms pantheism and panentheism, already discussed. But given that caveat, the God of the Gita is clearly a Supreme Being, without any competitors: Krishna is described as God of gods (10.14), the origin of all other gods (10.12), the Primeval Person (11.38), the Lord of the worlds (5.29), the creator and sustainer of everything (8.9), and on and on. As the Gita says, no one is equal to or greater than Him (11.43).

Krishna's supremacy is so blatant, in fact, that one wonders why there would be any question at all. Perhaps it is because He is contrasted with other gods — demigods, or specially empowered beings — who serve as universal administrators. Indeed, this is why various forms of Indian religion are often described as polytheistic, or endorsing the worship of many gods. But, at least in terms of the Gita, such charges cannot stand. Though other gods may exist, Krishna is clearly Supreme.

Biblical scholars might want to stop us here, claiming that, since other gods are even acknowledged, the Gita's religion is not really monotheism in the most traditional sense of the word. However, it should be remembered that early Israelite tribes themselves adhered to "monolatry" as opposed to strict monotheism, in which they, too, worshipped one Supreme God among many. And besides, as already stated, we use the term monotheism with caution.

It should also be noted that the Gita's monotheism is distinct, deserving terminology of its own. Apropos of this, Graham M. Schweig, Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Christopher-Newport University, Virginia, sees the Gita's Vaishnavism as "polymorphic monotheism," in other

words, a theology that recognizes many forms (ananta rupa) of the one, single unitary divinity.[8]

Worshippers of such a many-formed God could superficially be accused of polytheism, but those who actually understand the tradition know that it merely acknowledges God's capacity to be in many places at once and to appear in a variety of forms at the same time. This is not to say that all forms are God's — the Vedic literature is quite clear about what constitutes a form of the Supreme Lord, and only these are to be worshipped. In fact, the Gita promotes worship of one Supreme Personality of Godhead — also known as Bhagavan.[9]

But the monotheistic worship of Bhagavan — lovingly adored as Krishna, or Vishnu — is unique in the history of religions, for here we actually get to see, or visualize, the Lord of our prayers. If the scriptures had placed "a face" on Paramatma, as He exists within every atom, they do so much more for Sri Krishna. Devotees become privy to His numerous ecstatic features and His day-to-day activities with eternal associates in the spiritual world.

In conclusion, I would agree with the three scholars mentioned in the beginning of this article, fully accepting their diverse views. Like the first of these well-meaning men, I acknowledge that the Gita promotes a type of pantheism, God's presence as a metaphysical dimension of nature. But I would hasten to add that the Gita's pantheism goes beyond the kind we usually hear about in the West. It shows us that there is a person behind the divinity perceivable in the natural world. I agree, too, that the Gita shows us a form of panentheism, sharing with its readers God's immanence and how we might perceive that immanence in our day-to-day lives. And finally, of course, I agree with the third scholar most of all: that the Gita's ultimate teaching is bhakti, or devotion to a Supreme Personal Godhead. This, indeed, is the Gita's crowning glory.

What I disagree with is how the three scholars address the Gita's diversity. The ancient wisdom-text gives us several views of God, all legitimate and each revealing different aspects of the Divine. It is not that if one of these aspects is correct then the others must be wrong. Rather, the Gita revels in multifaceted reality, taking its readers from fundamental conceptions of the Absolute Truth to Krishna, the Supreme Personality of Godhead.

Brahman, Paramatma, and Bhagavan are three aspects of that same Truth, manifesting variously according to the realization and wisdom of the practitioner. Those who approach God through knowledge tend to realize His eternality aspect — and in perfection, this is Brahman realization. Yogis and mystics will meditate on the Lord in the heart, and the highest point of such meditation is called Paramatma realization. This is where one realizes not only eternality but the ultimate end of all knowledge as well. Finally, the highest and most inclusive of theistic pursuits culminate in devotion to God. Those who adopt this process focus on Bhagavan, the worship of whom leads to divine love. Here, one reaps the benefit of all other processes, affording the practitioner the zenith of eternity, knowledge, and bliss as well. Indeed, this is the best that pantheism, panentheism and monotheism have to offer.

What Exactly is a Guru?

As traditionally understood, there are three kinds of gurus: (1) the siksha guru, a person who instructs; (2) the diksha guru, a person who initiates with sacred mantras; and (3) the Lord in the heart, who is properly accessed through the prior two.

Krishna Das Kaviraja Goswami, the author of the Chaitanya Charitamrita and guru par excellence, informs us that these three manifestations are non-different from Krishna, or God, Himself:

guru kåñëa-rüpa hana çästrera pramäëe
guru-rüpe kåñëa kåpä karena bhakta-gaëe

"According to the revealed scriptures, the spiritual master is a manifestation of Krishna, who comes in the form of a guru to show his mercy to the devotional practitioner." (CC 1.1.45)

Siksha guruke ta jani Krishner swarupa
Antaryami, bhakta srestha-aye dui rupa.

"I understand the siksha guru as identical with Krishna. He has two manifestations: one as the Indwelling Guide and the other as the best of devotees." (CC 1.1.47)

The Sanskrit word for the "Indwelling Guide," or the Lord in the Heart, is antaryami, as indicated in this verse. Other texts refer to Him as Paramatma. Often, people feel they can call upon this form of the Lord at will, but it is actually quite difficult. Sometimes, God communicates directly with conditioned souls. However, this is rare. More often than not, it is our own conditioning and wishful thinking that we mistake for the Lord's communication. Therefore, we are asked by spiritual adepts to verify our perceptions with earthly representatives, or with the two kinds of great souls, gurus, described above.

Krishnadas Kaviraja Goswami says virtually the same thing:

jéve säkñät nähi täte guru caittya-rüpe
çikñä-guru haya kåñëa-mahänta-svarüpe

"Since one cannot generally experience the guru as the Supersoul, Krishna appears as the instructing spiritual master in the form of a highly advanced Vaishnava." (CC 1.1.58)

Clearly, then, one must take advantage of those great souls who act as gurus in this world. But it is critical to distinguish between legitimate teachers and charlatans. Thus, the Mundaka Upanishad (1.2.12) teaches that they can be identified as follows:

tad-vijïänärthaà sa gurum eväbhigacchet
samit-päëiù çrotriyaà brahma-niñöham

"To learn transcendental science, one must approach a bona fide spiritual master (guru) in disciplic succession (shrotriyam). The bona fide spiritual master is fixed in the Absolute Truth (brahma-nishtham)."

This verse contains more information than one might at first think. It not only highlights the importance of accepting a spiritual master, using a Sanskrit word in its imperative case (evabhigacchet), but begins to address two major characteristics of a bona fide teacher of spiritual sciences:

(1) The word shrotriyam indicates one who is proficient in Vedic knowledge. Traditionally, one developed such proficiency at the feet of a master (upanishad), and it was understood that one could not access this knowledge in any other way. Thus, a genuine guru must be someone coming in a historical succession of teachers, also known as a sampradaya ("lineage"). The Puranas speak of four such genuine lineages: the Shri-sampradaya, the Rudra-sampradaya, the Kumara-sampradaya, and the Brahma-sampradaya. The Puranas also mention the four prominent expositors of these sampradayas: Ramanuja, Vishnusvami, Nimbarka, and Madhva. A true spiritual master

should come in one of these four lineages.

In addition, the knowledge taught by the guru must be in accordance with shastra (the sacred texts) and sadhus (the other truly saintly persons throughout history). This is all part of the first item: shrotriyam.

(2) The second characteristic is rather obvious: brahma-nishtham — the guru must be "absorbed in transcendence," having traversed the path of spiritual illumination under his or her own qualified teachers. The guru's devotion is steady, unbroken, determined, and uncompromised. Whether or not the guru is actually enlightened, again, should be confirmed by spiritual authorities in a disciplic succession and by traditional, sacred texts. All that being said, the guru's main concern in life is God and the spiritual pursuit. He or she has no other interest. The bona fide teacher's passion for the Supreme should be self-evident, thorough, and contagious.

A Brief Introduction to Bhakti

The essence of spirituality is bhakti, or "devotion." In common parlance, it refers to "devotional love for Krishna (God)." His Divine Grace A. C.Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, foremost teacher of bhakti in the modern era, has defined it as "devotional service," with an emphasis on service. This is significant. True devotion manifests in action. We all know this to be true: you can tell someone you love them until you are blue in the face, but unless you actually do something for your beloved to express your love, it is nothing but talk. This same truth adheres in spiritual circles.

Etymologically, the word bhakti itself is derived from the verbal root bhaj, which means "to worship," "to be devoted to" or "to participate in" — "to share." This sharing chiefly manifests as giving love, as sharing one's heart. In the second verse of his famed sutras on bhakti, Shandilya defines bhakti as "exclusive and intense loving attachment to the Lord." The Vaishnava sage Narada elaborates upon this definition in his Narada-bhakti-sutra, where he says, "Bhakti consists of offering one's every action to the Divine and feeling extreme distress when not able to do so" (Sutra 19). The very first book of the Bhagavatam defines bhakti as parama-dharma, or "the highest and most satisfying function of the soul." Thus, to share one's heart with the Divine is to satisfy the soul — a new context for the idea that it is better to give than to receive.

Interestingly, the root bhaj has a secondary meaning that supports the Vaishnava contention of sharing with the Divine. First of all, for sharing to take place, there must be two entities (unless one is a narcissist). Thus, it is no mistake that the secondary meaning of bhaj is "separation," or "to divide" — "distinction." This derivation speaks to the importance of Vaishnava dualism: one can only serve a God who is "separate" from the self. If the living being is fundamentally one with God, as Advaita Vedantists propose, there is no opportunity for bhakti, because bhakti implies two entities: the devotee and the one to whom he or she is devoted.

The Bhakti Movement

It should be noted that bhakti is eternal, and can be found, in its essence, in all religious traditions. Still, it became prominent, in its most profound form, in Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-century India, which witnessed a "bhakti renaissance," if you will.

Coincidentally, during this same period, the Western world experienced its own Renaissance –one that moved in the opposite direction. If the Indian renaissance emphasized devotion to God, the Western one focused on empirical learning and material progress, and on science and technology. In essence, Western materialism came to the fore, and spirituality receded into the background.

The European Renaissance is often seen as a time of expansion and growth, with a move toward self-sufficiency and a sense of modernity. Historian Jules Michelet sought to define this era with the term "rebirth," indicating that it was indeed a new dawn, a time when man could finally move beyond religion and superstition and "wake up" to the world around him.

The bhakti renaissance, unlike its Western counterpart, was a move toward minimalism, if also toward essential spiritual truths. Rather than reach for new levels of complexity, this renaissance was concerned with the essential dynamics of the religious impulse; it responded to man's inner need for devotional exchange with his Creator, to man's longing for love.

There were those, however, who held on to ritualistic tradition and resisted the "new ideas" of the bhakti reformers, even though the bhakti movement drew its premises from the very same texts the traditionalists used: the Vedas.

Nonetheless, most of India has been greatly influenced by bhakti and bhakti's practitioners. This may be because bhakti speaks to something fundamental in man, and because the opposite, a renaissance moving toward material progress, while advantageous in some ways, ultimately leaves one spiritually barren and missing the point of life.

A traditional story personifies bhakti as a beautiful woman. Bhakti, according to this narrative, is born in Southern India and eventually grows to maturity while traveling north. Indeed, the earliest evidence of Vaishnava culture is found in the South.

Southern Vaishnavism developed through the work of the Alvars, important early teachers of the bhakti tradition. Alvar means "absorbed in meditation" or "drenched in God." Such was the mood of the saints and sages of the Medieval bhakti movement in the South. There are twelve famous Alvars, but the most important are Nammalvar, Kulashekhara, and Andal (the daughter of Periyalvar). Their

lives and poetry are remembered and savored by South Indian Vaishnavas, especially those belonging to the Ramanuja lineage.

While the devotion of the Alvars was thriving in the South, much of North India, besieged by foreign rule, had moved away from its Vaishnava heritage. However, with the appearance of a succession of teachers that culminated in the Fifteenth century with Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, this was all to change.

Bhakti **in the North**

According to the previously mentioned metaphor, bhakti was born in the South. A good deal of archeological evidence shows, however, that bhakti also had a twin born in the northern provinces. Still, it was not until the Twelfth century that bhakti movements became a major force in northern and central India, from Kashmir and Gujarat to Bengal and Orissa. At this time, a gifted generation of practitioners composed poems that would define the Vaishnava tradition by expressing themes from traditional scriptures, such as the Srimad Bhagavatam and Bhagavad Gita, in vernacular languages. The original poetry of Medieval bhakti in Hindi, Bengali, Marathi, and other Indian regional languages help readers understand what bhakti is really all about. Authors like Tulasidas, Kabir, Surdas, and Mirabai have enhanced the bhakti movement with their songs of love.

Three North Indian writers — Vidyapati, Jayadeva, and Chandidas, among others — added to the fervor by producing a body of particularly profound poetry. These poets and saints emphasized the intensity of love for God in separation from Him — a form of spiritual longing rarely achieved. Expressing the deeper sentiments of Vaishnava mysticism, their work greatly influenced later teachers. Formal systematization of northern Vaishnava thought was eventually effected by several prominent teachers, most notably by Vallabha, Sri Chaitanya, and the Six Goswamis of Vrindavan, who developed the teachings of bhakti like no others. Here we come to see bhakti as a mystical, yet detailed, science with laws of function. This might seem odd when considering that bhakti refers to devotion and love, but even these more subtle and emotional avenues of the heart have certain modes of behavior, and these have been documented by the self-realized sages mentioned above. The great acharyas throughout history, especially those who followed Sri Chaitanya, have explained how love and devotion manifest; how they are sustained; and how one reaches perfection on the path, all with carefully calculated procedures and methodology.

Conclusion

Today, bhakti is appreciated by yoga groups and scholars of religion, by comparative religionists and devotees who look for the essence of spirituality, which is divine love. Such love is epitomized by the passion (raga) of enthusiastic practitioners, which is ideally counterbalanced by learning and a sense of down-to-earth ethics.

Raga, which is defined by Bhaktivinoda Thakur in its material sense as "an intense desire to enjoy" and in its spiritual sense as "an intense desire to serve," ultimately refers to deep attachment or even passionate attachment to the Lord — this is bhakti. It comes of its own accord, rising in the heart as a result of pure association, or as the rekindling of some spiritual memory from a former life. It is the intense desire to follow in the footsteps of successful bhaktas (devotees), throughout history, for they exemplify what it means to love the Lord and to dedicate one's life to serving Him.

The Science of Love

As a young seeker in the 1960s, I was, like most of my peers, looking for love. Material love, yes, but also spiritual love. I was exploring the world's various religions with this in mind — an elusive subject, to be sure. I am not saying that I was "looking for love in all the wrong places" — absolutely not. Indeed, all of the world's theistic traditions have much to say about it. But none of them satisfied my quest like the Vaishnava tradition of India, known in the West as the Hare Krishna movement.

Here, I found love expressed as a science. The Krishna-conscious expression of love is epitomized in the person of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, who is seen by the movement as Lord Krishna Himself in the guise of His own devotee. His immediate followers, the Six Goswamis of Vrindavan, explained bhakti, or devotional love, as a yogic science. Based on Sri Chaitanya's personal example and teachings, they brought out the inner meaning of the loving exchange with God, not just for His tradition, but in general, as a universal methodology for attaining a Supreme love.

Sri Chaitanya showed how this plays out experientially. His life and example were soaked in God consciousness. Indeed, he was called a golden volcano of divine love, with lava, or ecstatic symptoms, that could not be contained in His body. And the Goswamis documented it so all of us could benefit from His maddening, exuberant, and spontaneous love. On one hand, love is natural and easy to perform, and on the other hand, to do it right, it is a science.

When we love someone, even in this world, there are a series of feelings that engulf us, but if we want to develop a deep and committed relationship with our beloved, there are certain steps we must take; there's a certain procedure. For love to blossom, we have to properly show our love for a given person, we have to nurture them and do other things that help them feel loved. There is a way to do this.

We may love our husband or wife, but what do we do to help our partner feel loved? This is the question. Though love is natural and from the heart, there's actually an art and a science to how one develops and shows one's love. Psychologists and sociologists have long studied the art and heart of relationships. Just as there are signs and signals of a healthy and harmonious relationship, and things we do that support this, there are other things we do that will harm our relationships. That is the science of love. And because few bother to learn this, the divorce rate is at an all-time high.

Sri Chaitanya was like the exemplar of love. When He would chant and dance, people would see He was in deep, deep ecstasy, with tears of love streaming from his eyes, and they would say, "I want that — I want to be like Him." And so the Six Goswamis documented the different stages of ecstasy, with special notice taken of His behavior and bodily symptoms. They wrote down the science of how to chant properly, and thus how to experience the love that He was feeling. They documented what works and what doesn't work in building a relationship with the divine through kirtan (song) and through the various processes of bhakti-yoga.

Some may argue that love and science are diametrically opposed, and there is certainly some truth to this. But, as I have already shown, love obeys certain laws of function, even in the material world. Helen Fisher of Rutgers University, for example, has proposed three stages of love — lust, attraction, and attachment. Each stage, she says, is associated with different hormones and chemicals.[10] The initial stages of lust activates one's stress response, increasing blood levels of adrenalin and cortisol. This creates symptoms in the body, like heat, sweat and an increased heartbeat. In addition, Fisher tells us that three main neurotransmitters effect attraction: adrenaline, dopamine and serotonin. And then there is attachment, which facilitates a sense of commitment leading to sustainable and long-lived relationships. This all takes place through the body's release of oxytocin and vasopressin, says Fisher (based on a number of scientific studies).

Our entire enterprise of loving exchange in the material world can be reduced to chemicals — that, of course, and conditioning. Deep-rooted tastes based on prior experience and the inexplicable rumblings of the heart are factors. However, love, even material love, can be analyzed scientifically, and there is some legitimacy to this.

This is obviously not my main point. Lust, attraction, and attachment, in the end, are really manifestations of some inner spiritual hunger, a desire to know and love God. The attempt to satisfy spiritual hunger in the realm of sense pleasure is merely a sign of ignorance and of insufficient understanding. Our search for pure, expansive love will only be satisfied in the realm of the spirit, and deep down we know this, because that is who we really are: we are spiritual beings, thirsting after spiritual relationships. Sri Chaitanya and the Goswamis came to give this knowledge and this

truth.

Love supersedes lust, and, if we are fortunate, replaces it. Until we are educated in the principles of true spiritual love, we must associate with the handmaidens of its material counterpart, including envy, jealousy, pride, hatred, malice, fear, and so on. Ultimately, lust leads us to frustration and madness, and if it is not replaced by spiritual love, it leads to the abyss of emptiness, a spiritual void that makes life quite unlivable.

Bhakti-Yoga: **The Path to Love**

Religion or spirituality is often said to rest on blind faith and sentiment, while science rests on observation and experiment. This is not so, in the Vaishnava scheme of things. As already stated, the Goswamis left a massive literary tradition showing how one can not only develop love for God, but how to gauge that love scientifically and methodically.

It begins by chanting the holy names of Krishna and by following certain purificatory principles. In the Vaishnava tradition, these principles include no meat-eating, no illicit sex, no intoxication, and no gambling. In doing this, the soul seeks to achieve a purified state, unfettered by the contaminating forces of Kali-yuga, the current age of quarrel and hypocrisy. This allows the scientific experiment to proceed.

In any scientific experiment, the object of study must be observed in its pure and unadulterated form, in isolation from all outside influences. Nature, as we know, does not always present things in a pure and unmixed form, and so adjustments must sometimes be made. Once this is done, the results are carefully watched and, in due course, the laws governing its behavior are discovered. These laws are documented and this is how a science is born. Bhakti adheres to this same principle, but in relation to the soul and God. The living being in the material world also does not exist in its pure form. It is informed or colored by the particular body and conditioning that it has accrued over the course of time. Therefore, the first step in the science of bhakti is the purification of the self.

That's why the purificatory principles already mentioned are required. Sometimes, it might even be necessary, for some, to live in a monastery or an ashram. In this way, the soul is isolated from external influences, and the science of bhakti can thrive. But it is not always required. It depends on the individual. One's own conscience and the guidance of more experienced devotees are critical here. They will determine exactly what each soul needs in this very personal experiment.

Srila Prabhupada subtitled his book, The Nectar of Devotion, as The Complete Science of Bhakti-Yoga, and in his many writings he sought to show how bhakti is, indeed, a science. Here is but one example:

> The process of bhakti-yoga is not a concoction or speculation. It is a science. As stated in the present verse, bhagavat-tattva-vijñānam [SB 1.2.20], "one gains scientific knowledge of the Personality of Godhead." Vijñāna means "science." In mathematics, "Two plus two equals four" is always true. You cannot make it equal five according to your whims. No. Because mathematics is a science, whether you are in America or India or England, you will find that everyone accepts that two plus two equals four. Similarly, you cannot imagine God according to your whims. Nowadays many people say, "You can imagine your God, and I can imagine my God." No, there is no question of imagining anything about God. As stated here, the scientific truth of God can be understood by a person who is mukta-saṅga, freed from material association. Such a person, being transcendental to the lower modes of nature, is jubilant and enlightened (prasanna-manasaḥ). As long as you are under the jurisdiction of the modes of ignorance and passion, there is no question of jubilation or enlightenment. Therefore you have to come to the platform of pure goodness.[11]

The Science of Love

So that is basically how love develops — by following the principles of bhakti-yoga. One can gradually feel the heart becoming purified, and one's anarthas, or bad habits, gradually go away. When the experiment is conducted in the association of other devotees, one can easily gauge one's progress. One's material fever subsides, and one's taste for the accoutrements of the spirit increases. One develops a taste for Krishna and other spiritual subjects, and one loses interest in things that take us away from our spiritual pursuits.

But I began by saying that my search for a science of spiritual love was satisfied in the Vaishnava tradition. I'd like to briefly expand on this, so you can see that a complete taxonomy and theology of love exists in my adopted tradition. For example, one of the great teachers of our lineage, Bhaktivinoda Thakura, writes in his book, Gitamala:

> The development of ecstatic love of Godhead gradually thickens and intensifies as it manifests in seven stages of ecstasy known as: 1) Prema (general ecstatic love for the Personality of Godhead); 2) Sneha (personal affection borne of a softened and melted heart); 3) Mana (pouting counter-love due to confidential familiarity); 4) Pranaya (mutually intimate love devoid of shyness or hesitation); 5) Raga (highly involved attachment that disregards any offense); 6) Anuraga (the constant presence of supplementary attachments that ripple and twinkle in waves of mutual charms); 7) Bhava (the stage of wildly relishable exhilaration in a transparently pure yet supremely inflamed love-passion). All these stages of the sthayi bhava are spotlessly free from any material impurities… The above mentioned symptoms are all-together known as prema (love of Godhead).

Each of these stages of love for God is delineated in the writings of the Goswamis, and in Prabhupada's books, which summarize these teachings in modern language.

The Chaitanya Charitamrita (Madhya-lila 23) helps practitioners understand these various levels of love by comparing them to various kinds of sugar:

> Love of Godhead increases and is manifested as affection, counterlove, love, attachment, subattachment, ecstasy and sublime ecstasy. This development is compared to sugarcane seeds, sugarcane plants, sugarcane juice, molasses, crude sugar, refined sugar, sugar candy and rock candy. One should understand that just as the taste of sugar increases as it is gradually purified, so when love of Godhead increases from rati, which is compared to the beginning seed, its taste increases. According to the candidate possessing these transcendental qualities [sneha, mana and so on], there are five transcendental mellows — neutrality, servitorship, friendship, parental love and conjugal love.

Srila Prabhupada's guru, Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati Goswami, elaborates:

> This form of bhakti is fit to be cultured. Being duly cultured it gives rise to Rati (the natural tendency of the soul towards Krishna, or the basic principal of Love). Condensed Rati is Prema. By the process of gradual augmentation Prema becomes Sneha, Maana, Pranaya, Anuraga, Bhava and Mahabhava. A good analogy is furnished by the series of processes in the refining of raw juice of sugarcane. First there is juice, then molasses, raw sugar, residual sugar, refined sugar, white sugar and icing sugar. These are varieties of the basic principle (Sthayibhava) in the operations of the mellow liquid (Rasa) of the Service of Krishna. If the basic principle is conjoined with higher principles known as Vaibhava, Anubhava, Satvika and Vyabhachari then the operations of the liquid mellow of the service of Krishna exhibits the most exquisite nectarean taste. Just as the treatment of curd with sugar, ghee, pepper and camphor produces a most tasty composition.[12]

Love of Man and Love of God

A reader from the Christian tradition once pointed out to me that, to Christians, love of God is intimately connected to love of man. He went on to say that that is how they express their love of God: through loving their brothers and sisters under God's fatherhood. He wanted to know how the Vaishnava conception of love ties in with love for God's creatures.

I believe this is an important question. However, the Christian tradition makes it clear that love of God and love of man are two different things. When Jesus was asked which commandment is greatest, he said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." And then he augmented it: "This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets." (Matthew 22:36) So they are actually two different things. The second commandment, he says, is like the first one, but it is not the same as the first one. It is different.

Christian mystics throughout history have underscored this point. St. John of the Cross, St. Teresa

of Avila, and others, elaborated on love for God and how to pursue that love on a very high spiritual platform. Of course, they also promoted helping our fellow man and showing love for all of God's creatures. The same is true in Vaishnavism. And from my perspective, I found a certain accessibility and clarity of thought in Vaishnavism that I could not find elsewhere, though I am certain it is there: all religious traditions basically espouse the truth contained in one's love for God, though it is expressed in different ways.

As for love of God's creatures, Krishna Consciousness extends that even to animals (as many of the Christian mystics did). Devotees practice vegetarianism as a religious imperative. There is no question of loving God's creatures if you eat them. And how do devotees show love of their fellow man: by educating them spiritually, by feeding them with Krishna prasadam, which is consecrated food. In short, by helping them in the most important ways: by giving them a spiritual dimension. This is love on a very, very deep level.

Conclusion

This all begins by rendering simple service in the association of devotees. By regularly rendering devotional service, one gradually becomes attached to the Supreme Personality of Godhead. When that attachment is intensified, it becomes love of Godhead. This is the science of bhakti-yoga.

It plays out like this: according to the Chaitanya Charitamrita, if by good fortune one begins to associate with devotees, he will naturally feel encouragement in devotional service. Thus, by remaining in the association of devotees, one becomes free from all unwanted contamination and develops expertise in the regulative principles, as well as chanting and hearing. When one is freed from all unwanted contamination, he advances with firm faith. When firm faith in devotional service awakens, a taste for hearing and chanting also awakens. After such a taste is awakened, a deep attachment arises, and from that attachment, the seed of love for Krsna grows in the heart. When that ecstatic emotional stage intensifies, it is called love of Godhead. Such love is life's ultimate goal and the reservoir of all pleasure. If one actually has the seed of transcendental emotion in his heart, the symptoms will be visible in his activities. That, says the Chaitanya Charitamrita, is the verdict of all revealed scriptures.

Truth, by Any Other Name

"What's your name, 'Satyaraja,' actually mean?" It was a predictable question, especially since Sanskritists are few and far between at my local health food store.

"Satyaraja Dasa means 'servant of the king of truth,'" I replied, feeling presumptuous for identifying myself with such a lofty concept. I felt compelled to add: "It's not that I am the king of truth, but I'm the servant of the king of truth. The king of truth is God."

"Oh?" one eavesdropping woman whispered to her friend, "I never think of God as the king of truth." Sad, but true. Most people think of God as creator, far away in heaven, or someone they might pray to, and they think of truth as something altogether different.

In fact, the modern world gives us no single definition of truth. There are numerous claims as to what might constitute aspects of truth; how to define and identify that which seems to be true in some circumstances; and discussion as to whether truth is subjective, relative, objective, or absolute. Still, there is no overarching definition. Even the dictionary tends to define it as "conformity to fact or actuality." But this only removes the problem by one, small step: what is factual and actual?

As the Vedas say, "Truth will conquer" (satyam jayate). But what do the Vedas mean by "truth"? The Absolute Truth is defined in the Vedanta-sutra: janmady asya yato — it is that from which, or He from whom, everything emanates. The concept of the Absolute Truth is even higher than the concept of God. After all, God comes from the Germanic root, goot, meaning "the good one." And God is certainly the ultimate personality of goodness. But there's more to God than that.

Similarly, in Sanskrit, the word for God is ishvara, which means "controller." But the concept of the Absolute Truth is still higher, because selected deities, demigods, or highly posted officials of the universe can serve as controllers on God's behalf. This is why Krishna, according to the Srimad Bhagavatam, is called the origin of everything — He is the ultimate Truth, transcending both the concept of pure goodness and the ability to control the cosmic manifestation.

Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati Thakura, the spiritual master of His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, the founder-acharya of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, often wrote about the nature of truth in his English periodical, The Harmonist. Here is one such insightful passage, displaying his distinct stream-of-consciousness, poetic writing style:

> Do not try to discover the nature of Truth by the exercise of your imagination. Do not endeavor to attain the Truth through experience of this world. Do not manufacture Truth in order to satisfy your erring inclinations, nor hastily accept as Truth anything for the reason that it satisfies such inclinations. Do not regard as Truth anything that has been built up by or has the support of a majority of people like yourself — nor as un-Truth anything that is rejected by the overwhelming majority. According to the scriptures, there is to be found hardly one in a crore of human beings who really worships the Truth. That which is proclaimed by the united voices of all the people of this world as Truth may turn out to be false. Therefore, cease to confront the Truth in a challenging mood. The Truth is not brought into existence by such arrogance. One has to approach the Truth in a spirit of absolute submission. It is necessary to listen to the Truth. Truth is self-revealing and it is only when It is pleased to reveal Itself that the real nature of the Truth can be known to us, and not otherwise.[13]

Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati's foremost disciple, Srila Prabhupada, unpacks his guru's teaching, adding that knowledge of ultimate truth should have implications for how we interact with the world around us. Srila Prabhupada writes,

While we may try to understand that Krishna is the source of everything, knowing the Absolute Truth also requires us to understand how Krishna's manifested energies impact our daily, personal lives. The Lord, the living entities, the material nature, time and karma (action and reaction) are all working together, and the relationship of these five basic truths is described in the Bhagavad Gita. The individual living entities, by their free will, desire, and nature, suffer from material conditioning. When at last our conditioned desires are channeled towards love of God through devotional service, our understanding of the Absolute becomes pure and complete.

Indeed, the intricacies of truth are quite complex. Up until this point, we have looked at ultimate Truth, but such Truth, Prabhupada suggests, can only have meaning for us if we understand how it manifests in the material world, or how Krishna's various energies function as part of that Truth. And it is perhaps this pragmatic aspect — how truth plays out in our day-to-day lives — that most concerns the majority of people today.

The Mahabharata, India's great epic, is aware of this, and it highlights the complexity involved in discerning what is true and what is not. There are at least two famous stories from the epic that speak

to this concern.

The first example is related by Krishna Himself about midway through the Mahabharata (8.49.41-46). He tells the story of a man named Kaushika, who had made a solemn pledge to always tell the truth — no matter what. In the incident cited here, he one day spotted a group of thugs chasing several innocent people, hoping to rob and kill them. These people, when confronted with the famously honest Kaushika, asked him not to divulge their whereabouts to the criminals who were chasing them. He did not respond, and the group of people hid nearby. Then, soon enough, the thugs appeared on the scene and, they, too, knew that Kaushika would never lie, so they asked him where the innocent people were hiding. In other words, Kaushika was in a bind: if he told a lie, he would be breaking his vow, and if he told the truth, the innocent people would be killed. In the end, Kausika told the truth, as he was wont to do, and the people in hiding were killed. Did he do the right thing? We will address this concern in a moment.

A related moral dilemma, also appearing in the Mahabharata (7.164.68), has to do with the death of Ashvatthama, the son of Dronacharya (a central Kaurava general). This was during the war of Kurukshetra. The Pandavas, it seems, were at times at a disadvantage in their battle with the evil Kauravas. A good deal of their hardship came from Drona himself, who appeared to be unconquerable. In an attempt to remedy the situation, Krishna suggested naming one of the Pandava elephants Ashvatthama, which was also the name of Drona's son. The plan was this: to tell Drona that "Ashvatthama" was dead, and by this he would think that he had lost his son. It was known that such a report would make him inconsolable, and as a result he would abandon his will to live. He could then be easily defeated.

The plan was put into effect, but an added element is this: Drona decided to ask Yudhishthira, eldest of the Pandava brothers, for confirmation, knowing that the noble prince would never tell a lie. Yudhishthira, shouting across the battlefield, confirmed Drona's worst suspicions — that Ashvatthama was in fact dead. As expected, the valiant warrior laid down his arms upon hearing of his son's death. The Pandava soldier Dhrishtadyumna then killed him according to plan.

As a side note, popular Hindu tradition asserts that King Yudhishthira had to go to hell for telling a lie on Krishna's behalf by saying "Ashvatthama is dead." But the Vaishnava tradition teaches instead that his visit to hell was instigated by his hesitation to tell that lie. God's will, says the tradition, supersedes all mundane morality, even if such morality is considered binding in all other circumstances. In other words, only if God is personally present, ordering the suspension of worldly ethics, as He did in Yudhishthira's case, should one do so. Otherwise, it is a sin.

In fact, what Yudhishthira actually said was that "Asvatthama 'the elephant' was dead," which was true. But Krishna blew his conch at the precise moment that the word "elephant" was uttered, conveniently drowning out that pivotal word. Thus, Drona would think that his son was dead and the plan could be enacted.

What is one to make of these stories? Put simply, truth in this world is relative. In general, of course, all truth is virtuous, but it must be embraced with wisdom and scriptural knowledge. If one looks to the greater aspect of Truth, as it manifests in service to the Lord, things become a little clearer. God is the ultimate Truth, and to follow Him under the guidance of a pure spiritual preceptor is the safest means for attaining perfection. Relative truth is always relative, just as the Absolute Truth is always absolute.

The above stories play a special role in commentaries on Patanjali's Yoga Sutras. There, we find certain writers who say that non-violence (ahimsa) is primary among the five precepts of yoga (which is why, according to Patanjali, it is listed first), and it should override the second teaching of truthfulness (sayta), at least when a choice must be made between the two.

So, in the first story, Kaushika told the truth, thus upholding a secondary teaching. But in doing this, he compromised a more important precept — especially because his truthfulness resulted in violence.

The second story, about Ashvatthama, indicates that truthfulness must involve intent, not just words. Thus, Yudhishthira, who proclaimed that "Ashvatthama the elephant is dead," was not really being truthful, for his intention was to deceive (even though an elephant by that name had, in fact, been killed).

We learn from the Mahabharata that the well-meaning Kaushika was not able to attain the supreme destination, for although he told the truth, it resulted in harm, and non-violence is considered a higher precept than mere "truth." Yudhishthira, for his part, was directly instructed by the Lord to tell a lie, and it was for the greater good of winning a spiritual battle, one that would rid the world of a

devastatingly evil power. Overall, Yudhisthira would never lie, and this is an inherent quality of all pure devotees. But, in this case, Krishna, God, personally instructed him to do so for a greater good. That being said, the text admits that, in ordinary circumstances, such a lie would be considered inappropriate and even sinful. And this, in a sense, is the overall lesson of ethics in the Mahabharata: truth is often circumstantial. That is to say, under the specific conditions they found themselves in, Kaushika should have lied, and Yudhishthira should not have lied. But Yudhishthira's situation, especially, was exceptional: he was exempt from the reaction to lying because his untruth was told on Krishna's behalf. Serving God's purposes is always Truth — it might even be called satyaraja, or the "king of Truth" — whatever it may appear like from a materialistic point-of-view. It is, in fact, Truth by any other name.

Postscript: The author is presenting these "truths" about truth with the understanding that we are speaking of general principles. I am aware that these truths can be, and have been, exploited and abused by selfish individuals throughout history. That being said, in an ultimate sense, these truths still stand.

The Importance of the Sri Isopanisad

Among all of Srila Prabhupada's books, Sri Isopanisad occupies a unique position. Generally, it is understood that the Bhagavad Gita, the Srimad Bhagavatam, the Chaitanya Charitamrita, and the Nectar of Devotion are Prabhupada's most important works. But within the larger context of Vedic scholarship, reflected in most branches of modern-day Hinduism, the Sri Isopanisad enjoys a special status — it comes from the category of texts known as sruti and, as such, it is often considered authoritative in ways the others, some might say, are not.

Sruti refers to the original four Vedas and their supplemental Upanishadic literature. The Vedic tradition itself honors these texts as "revelation" — given to the world directly by God — as opposed to smrti, or literature that was subsequently compiled by the sages of old. According to Vaishnava understanding, the two categories of literature are considered equally valid, and the latter category has indeed been called "the Fifth Veda," as stated in the Vedas themselves. (See, for example, the Chandogya Upanishad [7.1.4] and Brihad-aranyaka Upanishad [2.4.10].)

Still, special status is accorded to the original Veda, and it was therefore important for Srila Prabhupada to show that the Vaishnava conception of love for God is not just a product of smrti literature but can be found in sruti as well. Supporting Krishna conscious truths with Vedic evidences goes back to the greatest Krishna conscious masters in history, from Jiva Goswami to Baladeva Vidyabhusana, and Prabhupada was merely following their lead.

Thus, as far back as the early 1960s, before he had officially founded ISKCON, he had serialized his Isopanisad manuscript in Back to Godhead magazine. After coming to the West, it was one of the first books he published. He even suggested that his 1969 lecture, "What are the Vedas?", be used as an Introduction to the book, just to underline the importance of the Isopanisad's Vedic status.

In fact, Sri Isopanisad is the Fortieth (last) Chapter of the Shukla Yajur Veda , consisting of eighteen Sanskrit mantras. All lists of the most important Upanishads begin by mentioning this one. As Prabhupada writes, "Regarding the Upanishads, the following eleven are considered to be the topmost: Isa, Kena, Katha, Prasna, Mundaka, Mandukya, Taittireya, Aitareya, Chandogya, Brhad-aranyaka and Svetasvatara. However, in the Muktikopanisad, verses 30–39, there is a description of 108 Upanishads." (Adi 7.108) As sruti, then, the text was important for establishing the Krishna Consciousness movement.

There are other reasons for the preeminent position of this text, and these were made clear in the earlier commentaries of Vedanta Desika, from the Ramanuja school of Vaishnavism, and also in the one by Madhva, the great teacher from early on in the Krishna lineage. Put simply, the Isa-Upanishad is about isa, or ishvara, in other words, "the Supreme Controller" — God.

Whereas most other Upanishads are somewhat vague about the nature of the Absolute Truth, Sri Isopanisad delivers "the knowledge that brings one nearer to the Supreme Person, Krishna." The book takes its readers, methodically, from an impersonal understanding of God to an awareness of His all-pervading and unsurpassable personal aspect.

Prabhupada tells us that according to the Sri Isopanisad, "the Supreme Absolute Truth is both impersonal and personal eternally, but His personal aspect is more important than the impersonal one" (The Teachings of Lord Chaitanya, Chapter 24).

By way of evidence, the Isopanisad, in Mantra Twelve, offers an admonition against depersonalized conceptions of God: "Those who are engaged in the worship of the gods enter into the darkest region of ignorance and still more so do the worshippers of the impersonal Absolute." Vaishnava commentators say that impersonalists tend to fall into hellish consciousness because they deny God's ability to have personal features, implying that they have something that God does not. All of our greatest pleasures come from sensual experience, say the Vaishnavas, and God is not to be denied such pleasures. He can see, hear, speak, and love. In short, He can experience things as we do, but without the imperfections associated with a temporary and limited nature.

The Isopanisad further informs us that God's impersonal feature is essentially an overwhelming white light, purely spiritual, and fully engulfing all who come in its path. It is composed of His personal bodily effulgence, which can be blinding, denying its viewers access to the personal form at its base. In Mantra Fifteen of this same Upanishadic text, the personified Vedas pray, "O my Lord, sustainer of all that lives, Your real face is covered by Your orb of gold. Kindly remove that covering and exhibit Yourself to me, for I adore the Truth." Vaishnava exegesis holds that the mysterious "orb of gold" is the Lord's "impersonal effulgence." In Mantra Sixteen, we further read, "O my Lord, O

primeval philosopher, maintainer of the universe, O regulating principle, destination of pure souls, well-wisher of the progenitors of mankind, please remove the effulgence of Your transcendental rays so that I can see Your form of bliss. You are the eternal divine entity, and You are like the Sun…” For Vaishnavas, then, the impersonal aspect of the Lord is, in a sense, His less substantial side. This is so not only because it is bereft of personal characteristics — characteristics that allow one to have an intimate relationship with God — but because it can actually interfere with the ability to relate to God’s form.

In summing up, let it be known that Prabhupada’s translation and commentary on the Sri Isopanisad is brilliant not only in its execution, but also in its very conception. Because most people in the West are unaware of the importance of Vedic sruti in establishing evidence for spiritual adepts, Prabhupada’s use of the Sri Isopanisad falls on deaf ears, as it were. However, in reality, his choice of translating the Isopanisad will be important for his movement well into the future, not only for the many souls who take Vaishnava religion seriously, but also for scholars and theologians who know the value of the original Vedic literature.

Truth in a Nutshell: Four Special Verses in Both the *Srimad Bhagavatam* and the *Bhagavad Gita*

My mom always keeps peanuts around her house, the kind that come in those shells that, when you crack them open, you find two peanuts inside. So much goodness in one little package: beneficial nutrients, plant-proteins, unsaturated fats, fiber, and plenty of vitamins, minerals and bioactives. As I looked at the broken shells in front of me, my mind riveted to the "nutshell" verses of the Srimad Bhagavatam and the Bhagavad Gita, known traditionally as the chatur-shloki, or "four essential stanzas." Srila Prabhupada was the first to refer to them as nutshell verses.

Nutshells were originally used as metaphors as far back as 1602, when Shakespeare puts the following words in Hamlet's mouth: "O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a king of infinite space."[14] Some say the metaphor goes back much further, to the time of Pliny (23 BCE–79 CE) and perhaps even earlier. Whatever the case, the point is this: to fit "in a nutshell," something would have to be very small, and in relation to language, it refers to brevity, or to a summing up in very few words. In other words, if one refers to an idea "in a nutshell," one is speaking of its essential truth, its core — like the core of the nut, found inside its shell.

As stated, we find a similar phenomenon within Vaishnava scriptures, particularly the Bhagavatam and the Gita. Sridhara Swami (circa Thirteenth century), the famed commentator, begins his gloss on 10.8, the first of the Chatuh-shloki verses in the Gita, by mentioning the four-verse schema; Jiva Goswami (1513–1608) gives an elaborate analysis of the Chatuh-shloki Bhagavata in his Krama-sandarbha, and also in his Bhagavat Sandarbha; Srinivas Acharya (circa Sixteenth century) wrote a commentary specifically on the four verses of the Bhagavata; Vishvanath Chakravarti (1708–1754) and others draw on this idea of four central verses in both the Bhagavata and in the Gita, too. Following in this tradition, our own Srila Prabhupada often refers to the Chatuh-shloki as "four nutshell verses" in his writings. (See especially his commentaries on Srimad Bhagavatam 2.9.36 and 2.9.44.)

Without any further ado, then, let us look at the two primary examples of "four nutshell verses" as found in the Srimad Bhagavatam (Canto Two, Chapter 9, verses 33–36) and the Bhagavad Gita (10.8–11). First, the Bhagavatam:

> (33) O Brahma, know that I [Krishna], the Supreme One, existed prior to creation, when there was only me and nothing else. Even material nature, the cause of the cosmos, did not exist. That same divine entity now stands before you. And when everything is finished, I will be the only thing that remains.
>
> (34) O Brahma, if something is disconnected from me, then even if it seems to have worth or to be real—know this to be an illusion. It is a mere reflection of what truly is.
>
> (35) O Brahma, in the same way that the universal elements enter into the cosmos and at the same time do not enter into it, I also exist within everything created, and yet, simultaneously, I am outside of everything.
>
> (36) One who truly searches for the Absolute Truth, must pursue it in all circumstances, throughout space and time, both directly and indirectly.

And then the Bhagavad Gita:

> (10.8) [Krishna says] I am the source of all material and spiritual worlds — with everything originating in me. The enlightened show their knowledge of this fact by engaging in my service, worshipping me with their very essence.
>
> (10.9) My most dear devotees are always thinking of me, their lives are dedicated to my service, and they find supremely satisfying joy in consistently talking about me with each other.
>
> (10.10) I award knowledge by which one can attain me, but only to those who are constantly devoted and serve me with love.
>
> (10.11) Residing in their hearts, I show them special grace — I use the bright lamp of knowledge to destroy the darkness of their ignorance.

It should be clear that what these two sets of verses have in common, first and foremost, is that they

reveal the identity of God Himself — it is Lord Krishna, the Supreme Personality of Godhead. From the Bhagavatam verses we further learn that, in the beginning and in the end, there is only Krishna. All the commentators, especially Jiva Goswami and Srila Prabhupada, offer numerous verses to support this contention, such as the famous verse from the Maha-Narayana Upanishad: "Lord Vasudeva (Krishna) existed before the material world was created, when there was no Brahma and no Shiva." This verse is quoted by Jiva Goswami in his Bhagavat Sandarbha (96.11).

In other words, all other phenomenon, whether living or nonliving, spiritual or material, emanate from the Supreme Lord and wind up back inside Him as well. He is the source and origin of all, and He is their repose. This is not to say that His emanations are not real — they are real — but it is He who gives them their reality; He is the inner core of their existence. One who knows these truths, the Bhagavatam tells us, will pursue Krishna in earnest, with no other interest.

The first of these Gita verses reiterates this point: devotees engage in the Lord's service, desiring to attain Him and nothing more. But we are told more about these great souls — they think of Krishna constantly and are always engaged in glorifying Him. Through these unmotivated and uninterrupted actions, they are blessed with knowledge of the divine, compliments of Krishna Himself.

All this being said, it is beyond the scope of this article to fully elaborate on the eight verses found above. However, Prabhupada's commentaries on these specific verses make clear their full import, and he elaborates further on the Bhagavata Chatuhsloki, at least, in his commentary on Krishnadas Kaviraja Goswami's Chaitanya Charitamrita (Adi 1.53–56). In fact, Kaviraja Goswami tells us that "everything" — a far-reaching term, no doubt — is explained in those four nutshell verses (2.25.102): "The essence of Srimad Bhagavatam — our relationship with the Supreme Lord, our activities in that connection and the goal of life — is manifest in the four verses of Srimad Bhagavatam known as the Chatuh-shloki. Everything is explained in those verses."

The notion of just how these verses explain "everything" might be hinted at in Kaviraja Goswami's identification of these verses with OM, the sound representation of Krishna: "The meaning of the sound vibration omkara is present in the Gayatri mantra. The same is elaborately explained in the four shlokas of Srimad Bhagavatam known as Chatuh-shloki."(CC 2.25.94)

As Srila Prabhupada writes (CC 2.25.97): "The sound vibration omkara is the root of Vedic knowledge. This omkara is known as maha-vakya, or the supreme sound. Whatever meaning is in the supreme sound omkara is further understood in the Gayatri mantra. Again, this same meaning is explained in Srimad Bhagavatam in the four shlokas known as Catuh-shloki, which begin with the words aham evasam evagre. The Lord says, 'Only I existed before the creation.' From this verse, four shlokas have been composed, and these are known as the Chatuh-shloki. In this way the Supreme Personality of Godhead informed Lord Brahma about the purpose of the Chatuh-shloki. Again, Lord Brahma explained this to Narada Muni, and Narada Muni explained it to Srila Vyasadeva. This is the parampara system, the disciplic succession. The import of Vedic knowledge, the original word pranava [Omkara], has been explained in Srimad Bhagavatam..."

Succinctly, Jiva Goswami, drawing on the Gopala-tapani Upanishad, informs us how OM equals everything: "OM is a combination of the letters, AUM. The letter 'A' refers to Krishna. The Letter 'U' refers to Radha, and the letter 'M' refers to the jiva (ordinary) soul." Thus, Omkara, indeed, refers to everything.

There are other important points to found in the Chatuh-shloki. The commentators, whether focusing on the Bhagavatam or the Gita, seem to first of all emphasize that it is Krishna "the person" who existed before creation — it was not, as some Mayavadi commentators would have it, an impersonal force. Jiva Goswami is adamant about this. In his Bhagavat Sandarbha (96.10), he writes: "Here (referring to the first verse of the Bhagavatam Chatuh-shloki) the word aham ('I') refers to the form of the Lord, not the featureless Brahman . . . " The other great acharyas, from Visvanath Chakravarti to Srila Prabhupada, develop this theme as one of the most important teachings of the Chatuh-shloki. God in His original form is a person, and it is He who exists before creation.

In addition, the acharyas are quick to mention the related point: when everything comes to an end, it is Krishna — the person — who remains. Again, Jiva Goswami is clear in the Bhagavat Sandarbha (96.18): "At this point, someone may object: 'O Supreme Lord, is it not so that when the material universe is no longer manifest, You also no longer exist?' The Lord answers (SB 1.9.31): 'After annihilation what remains will also be I, the Personality of Godhead.'" Thus, it is clear that both before and after creation — what to speak of during it — Krishna is the center of all that exists. He is the real existence upon which all other existences are dependent.

But, after researching this subject at some length, one further question remained for me: if only

Krishna exists both before and after creation, is He alone? The tradition teaches that Krishna is never alone. He is always rejoicing in the company of His eternal associates, with whom He enjoys an exchange of love. The entire process of bhakti-yoga focuses on returning to Him, in our original home, where we, too, can resume our service in earnest. And yet, these Chatuh-shloki verses seemed to suggest that He alone exists. I needed to know what this meant.

Sure enough, I found that Jiva Goswami actually addresses this point in his Bhagavat Sandarbha (96.12): "As in the sentence 'The king goes,' the word 'king' may also mean 'the king's messenger' or 'the king's soldiers,' so the word aham ('I') here does not only mean the Lord but also means the Lord's abode of Vaikuntha, the Lord's associates, and everything else in direct relation with Him. In this way, the meaning should be understood." This is consistent with the teaching of the larger tradition, which states that Krishna is always in the company of His divine associates.

Sri Jiva's perspective here is interesting: he says that, in this case, the singular case, in other words, that "Krishna alone exists before and after the creation," actually implies the existence of others. He writes that aham eva asam is similar to raja asau prayati (The king heads out)." In the latter, one can assume that if the king is heading out, his entourage is heading out with him. Similarly, if Krishna existed before creation, His entourage must have existed with Him. Jiva's use of the king analogy is actually brilliant. To clarify: just as when one says, "The king is passing by" (as in a procession), the clear implication is that he is passing by with his entourage. Jiva further says that when one says "The king is not working," it means he is not engaged in his royal duties. It does not mean that he is inactive. During his "inactive" time, he might be with his family members, enjoying in their inner chambers. In the same way, says Jiva, before creation and after dissolution, the Lord is engaged in spiritually playful pastimes (lila) with His eternal associates. Sri Jiva justifies this by writing that Vaikuntha, the companions, and so forth are sub-limbs (upanga) of Krishna. They are parts of Him, and so they are naturally included in the word aham — thus, they exist before and after creation, too, along with Him.

But these are subtle points, and Vaishnava teachings gradually unfold for those who follow the path of bhakti-yoga. Closely studying verses like the Chatuh-shloki can help on the path. Bhaktivinoda Thakura (1834–1914), a great teacher in our line, eloquently expresses this as follows:

> Vaishnava-dharma is like a lotus flower which gradually comes into bloom when the time is ripe. First it appears as a bud, and then it slowly begins to blossom. In its maturity, it is fully blossomed and attracts all jivas (souls) by diffusing its sweet fragrance in every direction. At the beginning of creation, four aspects of knowledge were expressed to Brahma through the medium of the Chatuh-shloki Bhagavatam. These were bhagavat-jnana, transcendental knowledge of the Absolute as Bhagavan; maya-vijnana, analytical knowledge of the Lord's external potency; sadhana-bhakti, the means of attaining the goal; and prema, which is the object of attainment. These four elements were manifested in the jivas' hearts as the sprout of the lotus flower of Vaishnava-dharma.[15]

As Prabhupada nicely sums it up in his Bhagavatam commentary (SB 2.9.37):

> As in the Bhagavad Gita, Tenth Chapter, the Personality of Godhead, Lord Krishna, has summarized the whole text in four verses, namely, aham sarvasya prabhavah (BG 10.8), etc., so the complete Srimad Bhagavatam has also been summarized in four verses, as aham evasam evagre, etc. Thus the secret purpose of the most important Bhagavatite conclusion has been explained by the original speaker of the Srimad Bhagavatam, who was also the original speaker of the Bhagavad Gita, the Personality of Godhead, Lord Sri Krishna. There are many grammarians and nondevotee material wranglers who have tried to present false interpretations of these four verses of the Srimad Bhagavatam but the Lord Himself advised Brahmaji not to be deviated from the fixed conclusion the Lord had taught him. The Lord was the teacher of the nucleus of Srimad Bhagavatam in four verses, and Brahma was the receiver of the knowledge. Misinterpretation of the word aham by the word jugglery of the impersonalist should not disturb the mind of the strict followers of the Srimad Bhagavatam. Srimad Bhagavatam is the text of the Personality of Godhead and His unalloyed devotees, who are also known as the bhagavatas, and any outsider should have no access to this confidential literature of devotional service.

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Verses of Surrender: The *Charama-shlokas* of the Vaishnava Tradition

As devotees of Krishna, we often study the Vedic literature with a great deal of seriousness. Over time, certain verses stand out as particularly significant, and they help us on the path of transcendence.

Recently, I have been studying the three Charama-shlokas made popular by eminent followers of Ramanujacharya (1017–1137 CE), an important acharya in the Vaishnava tradition. They emphasized these stanzas as containing the essence of spiritual thought. The word charama, in fact, comes from the Sanskrit and means "ultimate," "concluding," and so on, and can also be interpreted as suggesting "a climax" or "the most important and significant." Shloka means "verse." So Charama-shlokas are verses that carry much weight for devotees. Although Bhagavad Gita 18.66 (see below) is by far the verse most commonly associated with a Charama-shloka, or "ultimate stanza," there are others as well.

The first of these is found in the Ramayana (Yuddha khanda 18.34): "If anyone surrenders to Me even once, saying, 'I am yours,' I will protect that person in all circumstances — this is my promise."

The context of the verse is as follows: when Vibhishana, the younger brother of the demon Ravana, decides to turn against his own flesh and blood, seeking refuge in Lord Rama, all of the Lord's associates become naturally suspicious — except Hanuman, who knew Vibhishana's heart. Hanuman had met him in Ravana's court after his initial flight across the ocean to Lanka. It was Vibhishana, in fact, who interceded when Ravana ordered Hanuman killed, showing that he was actually in favor of the Lord and His devotees.

Nonetheless, everyone in Rama's camp thought Vibhishana's defection insincere, and that he was probably acting as a spy on Ravana's behalf. But Rama and Hanuman knew, and Rama uttered the Charama-shloka, above, affirming that if anyone comes to Him in a mood of full surrender (sharanagati), as Vibhishana had done, He will accept them and protect them.

The next Charama-shloka is from the Varaha Purana (114.64-65), with Lord Varaha (Vishnu's boar Incarnation) making a similar proclamation about sharanagati to His consort, Bhumi Devi: "The entire universe is My body. Neither birth nor death have any effect on Me. When one gives oneself to Me (sharanagati) with the firm belief that I am his everlasting support, I think of him at the time of his death, and rush to his side even if he has no control over his senses, with his body appearing like a log or stone. I lead him then to My Supreme abode, where he performs eternal service to Me."

The reciprocal nature of love is emphasized in this verse: "Not only does the devotee love the Lord, but the Lord loves His devotee, too. Just as the devotee remembers Him, Krishna, in His kindness, remembers His devotee, bringing him to the Supreme Abode."

The final Charama-shloka is the famous utterance of Lord Krishna in the Bhagavad-gita (18.66): "Abandon all varieties of religion and simply surrender (sharanam, i.e., sharanagati) unto Me. I shall deliver you from all sinful reactions. Do not fear, worry, or hesitate."

Srila Prabhupada's commentary is illuminating:

> The Lord has described various kinds of knowledge and processes of religion — knowledge of the Supreme Brahman, knowledge of the Supersoul, knowledge of the different types of orders and statuses of social life, knowledge of the renounced order of life, knowledge of non-attachment, sense and mind control, meditation, etc. He has described in so many ways different types of religion. Now, in summarizing Bhagavad Gita, the Lord says that Arjuna should give up all the processes that have been explained to him; he should simply surrender to Krishna. That surrender will save him from all kinds of sinful reactions, for the Lord personally promises to protect him.

In Krishna's words we see the same essential elements of the other two Charama-shlokas: He asks for complete surrender (sharanagati), assures a reciprocal relationship, and offers a sense of protection and well-being for His devotee.

Not only Ramanuja, but Vishvanatha Chakravarti Thakura and Baladeva Vidyabhushana, two great acharyas in the Gaudiya sampradaya, the lineage to which the Hare Krishna movement belongs, also consider this verse (18.66) the zenith of the Bhagavad Gita's teaching, a culminating doctrine that is central to devotion to Krishna. It behooves devotees, then, to look at the concept more thoroughly, for herein one finds the essence of spiritual thought.

The question of just how to surrender looms large. My teacher, Srila Prabhupada, often said that

while Lord Krishna asks for surrender in the Bhagavad Gita, it took the appearance of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, some 500 years ago, to show the methodology or practical application of this instruction. Mahaprabhu taught that chanting and dancing — specifically the Hare Krishna Mahamantra, under the direction of a bona fide spiritual master and in the association of devotees — is how one surrenders to Krishna in the current age of Kali-yuga, an age of quarrel and hypocrisy. This is the central core of the surrendering process, but there is more. There are the characteristics of a surrendered soul, which have been detailed in the writings of great acharyas, or teachers in the disciplic succession.

In Ramanuja's branch of Vaishnavism, known as the Sri Sampradaya, sharanagati is often referred to by its synonym prapatti, which also means "self-surrender." The Alvars and other saints in that particular lineage have written about it extensively. Ramanuja himself explores it briefly, too, in his work Saranagati Gadyam, a Sanskrit prayer regularly recited by devotees in the Srivaishnava tradition.

Augmenting the knowledge found there, the Gaudiya Vaishnava acharya Bhaktivinoda Thakura, the father of Srila Prabhupada's guru, offers a clear articulation of sharanagati, methodically outlining its characteristics in his poem by the same name:

> Out of compassion for the fallen souls, Sri Krishna Chaitanya came to this world with His personal associates and divine abode to teach saranagati, surrender to the almighty Godhead, and to freely distribute ecstatic love of God, which is ordinarily very difficult to obtain. This saranagati is the very life of the true devotee.
>
> The ways of saranagati are humility, dedication of the self, acceptance of the Lord as one's only maintainer, faith that Krishna will surely protect, execution of only those acts favorable to pure devotion, and renunciation of conduct adverse to pure devotion.
>
> The youthful son of Nanda Maharaja, Sri Krishna, hears the prayers of anyone who takes refuge in Him by this six-fold practice.
>
> Bhaktivinode places a straw between his teeth, prostrates himself before the two Goswamis, Sri Rupa and Sri Sanatana, and clasps their lotus feet with his hands. "I am certainly the lowest of men," he tells them weeping, "but please make me the best of men by teaching me the ways of saranagati."

The scriptural basis upon which Bhaktivinode Thakur draws this information is the Lakshmi Tantra. Many great acharyas develop this same theme in an attempt to clarify the various modalities of surrender. For example, Vedanta Deshika (1269–1370 CE) in the Srivaishnava tradition was the first to explore it methodically, summarizing six divisions of self-surrender (shadanga prapatti) in a clear and analytical way. Jiva Goswami (1513–1608 CE) then developed the idea in his Bhagavata Sandarbha. This was adapted by Bhaktivinode as follows:

> anukulyasya sankalpa - Accepting those things that are favorable for pure devotion
> pratikulyasya varjanam - Rejecting those things that are averse to pure devotion
> raksisyatiti visvasa - Having firm faith that Sri Krishna will protect us under all circumstances from outside foes and inside foes
> goptrtve varanam - Accepting Him as the only Sustainer and Maintainer of our real and apparent selves.
> atma-niksepa - We all fully belong to Him as His parts and parcels.
> karpanya - Giving up all material ego and the false sense of who we are, we should realize that we are a spiritual spark — a minute part of the marginal potency (tatastha-shakti) of the Supreme Lord Sri Krishna, and therefore we should be humbler than a blade of grass.

The law of surrender is fundamental to the spiritual enterprise. It asks us to move beyond our self-centered ideas about life and into theo-centered ideas. This is not a sign of weakness but of strength. It is the recognition of our dependence on God, fostered by the realization that we are constitutionally His servants.

Every religion teaches this, in one form or another. In certain forms of Buddhism, for example, the very first principle is, "I take refuge in Lord Buddha" (Buddham sharanam gachchhami). Notice the word sharanam, as in the Charama-shlokas. And in Christianity, to cite yet another example, we find the same principle (even if the word sharanam or saranagati is not used): "…not my will, but thine, be done. (Luke 22.42) This is the essence of the Christian tradition. Indeed, the Christian flag, which represents all of Christendom, has a white field with a red Latin cross inside a blue canton. In Western culture, it is understood that a white flag is linked to surrender, and here, according to Christian commentators, it is a reference to Jesus' nonviolence and surrender to God's will. Again, this is not a surrender of weakness — it symbolizes strength of purpose and the ability to humble

oneself before God.

Perhaps the greatest example of spiritual surrender is found in the example of Draupadi, the wife of the Pandavas, whose exemplary devotion is illustrated in the Mahabharata. Due to a complex series of events, she found herself in the court of the Kauravas, the evil cousins of the Pandavas, where they tried to strip her naked. Duhsasana, specifically, was deputed to do this, and he wasted no time, before an assembly of elders, to enact his dastardly deed. As he started to tug on her sari, however, she prayed to Lord Krishna. But while praying, she clung to her cloth, as Duhsasana pulled and pulled — her clinging symbolized a kind of holding back, which showed that her surrender was not complete. Finally, she realized that she could protect herself no longer, and she let go, throwing her arms in the air, totally giving herself to Krishna's will ("thy will be done"). As she did this, calling out His name, "piles of saris rushed to her rescue." Duhsasana found it impossible to denude her, as more and more cloth arose to protect her — the more he pulled, the more it came to cover her.

This is the way sharanagati works. If we surrender with reservation, we get a commensurate result. But if we give our all, we get God.

Indeed, the Vaishnava sages teach that a completely surrendered soul has no cause for worry under any circumstances: the Supreme Lord Sri Krishna protects and sustains any and all surrendered souls, giving them just what they need to progress in spiritual life. The faithful devotee is not afraid to get his due, based on his karma and desire, and his main concern, always, is surrender to Krishna, with heart and soul. This is the essence of sharanagati.

“Sour Grapes” and the Vine of Vedic Knowledge: Does Krishna Consciousness Promote a Pessimistic Worldview?

“The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.” —Ezekiel 17:2

“Oouuuch!” After not seeing me for quite some time, I’m sure he expected a more meaningful exchange, perhaps simple pleasantries or a friendly conversation. But I was here to get down to business. No time for light talk. “Let’s see,” he said, looking into my mouth with the same determination with which Mother Yashoda must have looked into Krishna’s, when she was trying to determine if he had been eating dirt. “You need a few fillings. Hmm. Root canal, for sure, and definitely a bridge, right back here.” It was precisely at this point that the “ouch” blurted out of my mouth. He poked once too often.

“Come on,” I started. “The idea of all that dental work is depressing — it’s going to cost way too much, and it’s probably gonna hurt as well.”

“I’m not saying this to depress you,” he said, shaking his head. “These are the facts. Your teeth need attention, and they need it now.”

This sent my mind back to a conversation I had had the day before, at the Sunday Love Feast in the Brooklyn Hare Krishna temple. I was explaining certain basic points of Krishna conscious philosophy to a newcomer — I told her that the world was a place of misery, wherein repeated birth and death take place. We all go through birth, death, old age, and disease, I reminded her, and we all suffer from threefold miseries: those caused by our own bodies and minds, by the bodies and minds of others, and by natural calamities.

“Why are you so negative?” she asked, at which point I explained to her that the negative philosophy at the base of Krisha Consciousness is only a starting point. With this understanding — that the material world can be a nasty place — as a foundation, Krisha Consciousness goes on to explain how life can be a truly blissful experience, not only in some hopeful future life but also within our own lifetime, in the here and now. She was intrigued.

But now, sitting in my dentist’s chair, I sounded a lot like that young woman. My dentist was only giving me the facts, explaining the state of rot existing in my mouth. Nonetheless, I found it necessary to rebel, to insist that he was being overly negative. In a similar way, when I mentioned the obvious truth of life in an ever-decaying material world, my new friend at the temple needed to respond in kind, as if I was distorting the facts just to depress her.

Why do people respond in this way, and how much of this response is based on reality, on the actual nature of things? Is Krisha Consciousness unnecessarily pessimistic, or does it convey an accurate assessment of life in the material world? Is my somewhat negative diatribe, as expressed to that new visitor at the Hare Krishna temple, peculiar to the movement, or is it shared by other philosophers and religious traditions? More importantly, if suffering is indeed a major component of material existence, how does one rise beyond suffering and achieve the perfection of life — true spiritual happiness? These are some of the subjects briefly covered in this article.

Optimists, Pessimists, and Realists

People usually fall into one of two categories — either they are optimists or pessimists, which means that they view life as being basically a happy experience or a dismal one, respectively. Optimists see the cup as half-full, whereas pessimists see it as half-empty. These two types of people view the same phenomenon, but they view it differently. Why? What influences their outlook? Conditioning, one might say, but what exactly does this mean? According to the philosophy of Krisha Consciousness, people are governed by three constituents of material nature: goodness, passion, and ignorance. Goodness is uplifting, light, and positive. Passion is velocity, movement, aggression. And ignorance, in this context, is darkness, the tendency to lean toward negativity. The question, then, becomes this: is Krisha Consciousness supportive of a dark worldview, of the more fatalistic or morbid aspects of existence? In short, is it in the mode of ignorance?

The answer, of course, is no. And yet Krisha Consciousness does have much to say about the

darker side of life, about the perils of being caught in a temporary material body. At first blush, in fact, Krisha Consciousness might even appear pessimistic. However, a deeper look reveals that it transcends the usual duality of optimism and pessimism altogether. Rather, it is what I would call "realism," or, better yet, "spiritual realism." That is to say, it is balanced. This is so because it is not a product of the usual conditioned responses, positive or negative, but it is instead the spiritual consciousness bequeathed to us by the saints and sages of the past. Indeed, Krisha Consciousness is like a precious gem, originally revealed by God Himself, and then passed down by self-realized souls in disciplic succession, in an esoteric lineage created by God for the specific purpose of helping all conditioned souls reach the ultimate spiritual truth.

Pessimism and the Western Philosophical Tradition

In popular language, the term pessimist is associated with people who basically have a negative view of life. Because pain is familiar to them, they are not quite sure how to function without it. Though they aspire for a pain-free life, like the rest of us, living without negativity would make them uncomfortable, for it is all they know. Pessimism can be associated with or attributed to one's natural disposition, one's innate conditioning, or the way in which one is raised.

As a philosophical system, it is often a reaction to the acute pains inevitably associated with the material world. Loved ones leave or die, situations to which we become attached soon change, and fundamental anxieties find their way into our lives, especially that relentless truth of our own mortality — all cause suffering on both the gross and subtle levels. This idea is clear in Buddhist thought as well, where the Four Noble Truths categorize suffering in various ways, along with a coherent system for the cessation of suffering. And it is also taught in the Bhagavad Gita, one of the central texts of the Vedic tradition, upon which Krishna Consciousness rests.

In the West, Arthur Schopenhauer is considered one of the fathers of pessimism as a philosophical school of thought. His words, at least when it comes to suffering, merely echo the truths found in the Vedic literature. Ultimately, Schopenhauer tells us that "all life is suffering."

He explains this by noting that everything that lives has desire, wants, and needs. "Life wants," he says, "and because its wants are mostly unfulfilled, it exists largely in a state of unfulfilled striving and deprivation." He elaborates as follows:

> All willing springs from lack, from deficiency, and thus from suffering. Fulfillment brings this to an end; yet for one wish that is fulfilled there remain at least ten that are denied. Further, desiring lasts a long time, demands and requests go on to infinity, fulfillment is short and meted out sparingly. But even the final satisfaction itself is only apparent; the wish fulfilled at once makes way for a new one; the former is a known delusion, the latter a delusion not as yet known. No attained object of willing can give a satisfaction that lasts and no longer declines; but it is always like the alms thrown to a beggar, which reprieves him today so that his misery may be prolonged till tomorrow. Therefore, so long as our consciousness is filled by our will, so long as we are given up to the throng of desires with its constant hopes and fears, so long as we are the subject of willing, we never obtain lasting happiness or peace.[16]

Schopenhauer's analysis reminds me of something I said to my dentist at that fateful meeting, described above: all materialistic endeavors for happiness fall into three broad categories, and they all result in misery. (1) You endeavor for happiness and you don't achieve it. You're miserable for obvious reasons. (2) You endeavor for happiness, you achieve it, but it doesn't live up to your expectations. Again, you're miserable. (3) You endeavor for happiness, you get it, and it does live up to your expectations. But you lose it after some time. Is there any form of material happiness that doesn't fit into one of these three categories?

Is it Happiness or is it Misery?

"And even what we call 'happiness,'" says Schopenhauer, "is really only a temporary cessation of some particular suffering." He tells us that:

> All satisfaction, or what is commonly called happiness, is really and essentially always negative only, and never positive. It is not a gratification which comes to us originally and of itself, but it must always be the satisfaction of a wish. For desire, that is to say, want (or will), is the precedent condition of every pleasure; but with the satisfaction, the desire and therefore the pleasure cease; and so the satisfaction or gratification can never be more than deliverance from a pain, from a want.[17]

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This same idea is often articulated in the Vedic tradition. Srila Prabhupada, the founder-acharya of the International Society for Krisha Consciousness, often referred to happiness in the material world as merely "the cessation of misery." He used the analogy of the dunking stool in colonial America. To punish evil-doers, officers of the court used to tie criminals to a see-saw kind of dunking stool, easing them down into a barrel of water and then, periodically, lifting them up again. Gasping for air, the convicted felon would enjoy the simple act of breathing as if it were the greatest pleasure. Likewise, Prabhupada taught, because the material world is so devoid of any real enjoyment — of any substantive pleasure — the titillating sensations of the body and mind seem alluring, like a few precious breaths to a downing man.

So Are Devotees Pessimistic?

It is clear from Srila Prabhupada's books that suffering is integral to material existence: "Out of so many human beings who are suffering, there are a few who are actually inquiring about their position, as to what they are, why they are put into this awkward position and so on. Unless one is awakened to this position of questioning his suffering, unless he realizes that he doesn't want suffering but rather wants to make a solution to all suffering, then one is not to be considered a perfect human being. Humanity begins when this sort of inquiry is awakened in one's mind." (Bhagavad Gita as It Is, Introduction)

The final sentence in the above quote reveals something about the purpose of suffering in the material world. It is meant to act as an impetus for the human being to inquire about God consciousness. After lifetimes of various kinds of suffering, the wise begin to ask, "What is life all about? Why am I here? Why should I go on suffering?" These are the questions that separate humankind from the animals.

In a conversation with one of his disciples, Srila Prabhupada elaborates on the suffering associated with life in this world and how to rise beyond it:

> Disciple: He (the philosopher William James) sees two basic types of religions. One he calls sort of a naïve optimism that says "Hurrah for the universe. God's in His heaven, all is right with the world." He calls this "the sky-blue optimistic gospel." And another type of religion, which he calls pessimistic in the sense that these religions recognize the inevitable futility of materialistic life, and they offer deliverance, or mukti, from the fourfold miseries of material existence. He says, "Man must die to an unreal life before he can be born into the real life." So he felt that the most complete religions take a pessimistic view of life on life in this world, materialistic life.
>
> Prabhupada: Yes, unless one is pessimistic of this material world, he is animal. A man knows what are the sufferings of this material world: adhyatmic, adhibautic, adhidaivic. There are so many suffering pertaining to the mind, to the mind, sufferings offered by other living beings, and sufferings imposed forcibly by the laws of nature. So the world is full of suffering, but under the spell of maya, illusion, we accept this suffering condition as progress. But ultimately whatever we do, the death is there. All the resultant action of our activities, they are taken away and we are put to death. So under these circumstances there is no happiness within this material world. I have fully arranged for my happiness, and any moment, just after arrangement, we are kicked out; we have to accept death. So where is happiness here? The intelligent man is always pessimistic, that "First of all let us become secure," that we are trying to adjust this material position to become happy. But who is going to allow us to become happy here? This is pessimistic view. And then further advancement of knowledge is there, and when he understands the orders the orders of Krishna, sarva-dharman parityajya mam ekam saranam vraja, to surrender to the Supreme Personality of Godhead, and after surrendering and understanding Him fully, then we go to the world which is full of bliss, knowledge and eternal life, tyaktva deham punar janma naiti mam eti kaunteya. That is perfection of life. So unless we take a pessimistic view of this material world, we shall remain attached to it, and there will be repetition of birth and death — sometimes high-grade life, sometimes low-grade life, but this business is very, very disturbing. We make some arrangement to live here permanently, but nature will not allow us. Duhkhalayam asasvatam. We work very hard; there is unhappiness. And sometimes we may get good results, sometimes bad results, sometimes frustration, so where is happiness? Happiness is only to understand God and act according to His advice, and then go back to home, back to Godhead. That is happiness.

Prabhupada reveals a kind of hierarchy of consciousness. On the most fundamental level, he says, one believes that the world is a safe place, that there is lasting pleasure, and that one can live happily ever after. But he quickly adds that this is like animal life — where eating, sleeping, mating and defending are the primary activities, and one has little time to pursue God consciousness. Human beings, he tells us, must move on from this basic, animalistic mentality. And if they advance even a little, he says, then they adopt a pessimistic view of life, acknowledging the limitations of material

happiness, its shallowness and its temporary nature. Significantly, however — and this is the main point of our thesis — Prabhupada also talks about a yet higher level of existence, wherein one bids adieu to pessimism and becomes situated in Krisha Consciousness. From this perspective, life is full of meaning, full of purpose, full of bliss. It begins while serving Krishna in the material world, and carries on when we attain His supreme kingdom.

Conclusion

Overall, devotees believe in hope rather than despair and tolerance instead of fear. They believe in love and not hatred, compassion over selfishness, beauty instead of ugliness, and realized knowledge rather than blind faith or irrationality. They believe in working hard for the true betterment of humankind, and they give their time and life to help other people. These are not the virtues of the pessimist.

But devotees aren't naïve optimists, either. They don't believe that all humans are inherently good and inclined to higher pursuits. Krisha Consciousness is, instead, more of a pragmatic philosophy — humans are not necessarily good or evil, but they do have the capacity for both. And for this reason, Srila Prabhupada set up his institution (ISKCON) to encourage the ultimate good, while discouraging not only that which is overtly evil, but also goodness that is diluted by materialism. And it is here that many may look at devotees somewhat askance, wondering why they are not more involved in mundane social work or altruistic material endeavors. The truth is, devotees are inclined to these things, but they prefer to spiritualize it, to bring it to the next level by using it in Krishna's service. For example, devotees believe in feeding people, but they insist on feeding them Krishna prasadam, which is sumptuous vegetarian cuisine that has been offered to Krishna with love and devotion. Such prasadam is the epitome of food distribution, for it nourishes people both materially and spiritually. It is this kind of holistic endeavor that devotees favor and that they believe can help people overcome evil and pain.

And that is the question: how are we supposed to overcome evil and human suffering? Many traditional religions teach that these will only be overcome in an afterlife where a benevolent God rules over all in His paradisiacal kingdom. Krisha Consciousness, however, rejects the idea that we must wait for some pie-in-the-sky future. Yes, those who are Krishna conscious have secured a place for themselves in the hereafter, with Krishna in the spiritual world. But this is not their chief concern.

Instead, Prabhupada taught devotees that the fight against human suffering and evil must occur here and now. If we are responsible for that which goes wrong — which we are! — then we are also responsible for making things right. Krisha Consciousness teaches that we are indeed capable of making things right, but only if we surrender to God, with a heart full of love and devotion.

Prabhupada concludes:

> According to the Vedic philosophy, we should receive knowledge from a person who knows God. If one has not known God, his knowledge is useless, or, even worse, misleading. It is a fact that there is a supreme controller, and real education means understanding how the supreme controller is working. Denying Him is useless. He is there beyond our control, and we cannot avoid His control. We may make plans to live here very happily, but today or tomorrow, we may die. How can we deny the fact that we are being controlled? Knowledge means understanding how the supreme controller is controlling. People who defy religion and deny the existence of a supreme controller are like the jackal that keeps jumping and jumping, trying to reach grapes on a high vine. After seeing that he cannot reach the grapes, he says to himself, "Oh, there is no need to reach them. They are sour anyway." People who say that we do not need to understand God are indulging in sour grape philosophy.

Prabhupada here turns the "devotee as pessimist" idea on its head. Rather, he sees the materialist as pessimistic — as rejecting God because of a "sour grapes" kind of philosophy. Indeed, from the Vedic perspective, the devotee has the greatest hope for humankind: to engage them in Krishna's service, while the materialist is hopeless, having given up the quest to understand God. And in this hopelessness, they sometimes view devotees as negative, as that young girl at the temple, harmlessly if judgmentally, viewed me. Not that this girl was a materialist, but, having only recently embarked on the spiritual quest, she still clung to several of their preconceptions.

And so I say to her, and to whoever else might care to listen: when a devotee refers to the material world as temporary, as a realm of suffering, wherein repeated birth and death take place, it is not meant to deny the beauty and sanctity of material relationships and related phenomena, or to disregard the warmth, love, accomplishments, good will, and tenderness that might be found in this world. It is

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simply to call a spade a spade, and to acknowledge an obvious truth that is fundamental to material existence. That being said, devotees have an appreciation for this world unlike anyone else, for they see it in relation to God. One might complain, "You emphasize the Creator, but I see the Creator in His creation." Devotees, naturally, see this as well. But they are painfully aware that, sometimes, the creation can distract one from the Creator, and that this is too often the case. This is not sour grapes; it's just a fact of life.

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On Death and Dying:
A Vedic Perspective

What is death? It surrounds us throughout our lives, eventually bringing the loss of relatives, friends, and loved ones. It is the one thing that is certain about our own future, too. And yet it remains a mystery — something most people would prefer to forget. we'd rather set it aside in favor of material possessions, lucrative careers, popularity, and the pleasures of the senses. But it is always waiting in the wings.

And truth be told, what can we really know about death — we, who, as the Bible says, do not know life?

The Vedic literature therefore begins with a discussion of life — highlighting who we really are — for without such fundamental knowledge, how can we know anything about death?

What is Death?

Until relatively recently, people were considered dead when their heartbeat and breathing came to an end. But in modern times, because of more advanced techniques, a person's breathing and heartbeat can often be restarted. Additionally, life can sometimes be sustained with a series of life support devices, organ transplants, and artificial pacemakers, and so, when someone's heartbeat and breathing stop, it is now referred to as "clinical death." It is not considered the ultimate end of life.

To indicate the absolute end of life processes, medical authorities now use terms like "brain death" or "biological death." But surely there is more to death than this. Or, to state it more directly: there must be more to life. Clearly, we are not just machines that begin to malfunction and ultimately succumb to planned obsolescence. Life is more than that. And while we're on the subject, what is life? In fact, would not knowledge of what life really is be a prerequisite for a true understanding of death? Indeed, the body is just a machine, but life is not. We all sense it. Life goes beyond the technical apparatus of our external shell of bodily existence. It is known by the presence of consciousness.

Scientific texts often refer to the electrical processes of the brain, somehow associating these processes with consciousness. But evidence for such association is not to be found. No scientists can tell us exactly what electrical process results in consciousness. And yet consciousness exists. We love, hate, desire, feel and want, and this distinguishes us from other material phenomena that also have some connection with electricity and electromagnetic fields. The point is this: mere objects, such as electrons, do not feel anything at all; material objects are not self-aware, and yet such awareness is what distinguishes a conscious entity from dead matter. Thus, electrical impulses, in the brain or anywhere else, are not the cause of consciousness.

Rather, consciousness, the very symptom of the self or soul — call it what you will — must come from another quarter altogether. It has nothing to do with matter, not even subtle matter, like electricity. It is a unique force unlike any other, one that subsists in all circumstances, and which is thus sometimes called "spiritual."

And where does that life-force go at the time of death? The First Law of Thermodynamics tells us that energy can't be created or destroyed — so where does it go? Where does that energy in the body go when the mysterious phenomenon known as death overtakes us? Science is devoid of an answer.

The sages of ancient India, however, were not, because they looked at the true nature of life — and in life, again, we learn much about death.

The Vedic Literature

The Katha Upanishad, which is part of the Yajur Veda, tells the story of Nachiketas's visit to the Land of Death (Yamaloka).

When we first meet Nachiketas, he is a teenage boy, the son of Gautama Vajasravas, a Brahmin of some renown. The elderly Vajasravas was given to elaborate Vedic rituals; he loved the sacrificial arena, the sacred fire, and the mystical incantations that occasion such sacrifices. Often, Vajasravas would donate a number of cows to local sages as part of the sacrifice. But, one day, he offered them the least of his cattle. That is to say, the cows he gave in charity were devoid of milk, decrepit,

without teeth, and past the age of calving.

Nachiketas, for his part, was not known for his discretion, and he verbally assaulted his father in front of the sages, castigating him for his inferior offering. Vajasravas ignored him. But the boy raised his objection a second time, arrogantly saying that he was his father's best — and only the best should be offered in sacrifice. "Why don't you offer me, father?"

Vajasravas, in a rage, agreed to the boy's proposal, saying that he would indeed offer the young Nachiketas in sacrifice — a sacrifice to Yama, the Lord of Death. "Go to hell," he angrily told his son, and so, Nachiketas, as much a literalist as a dedicated son, immediately journeyed to the dark abode of Yama.

As he appeared in Yamaloka, the district of Yamaraja, he found that no one was there save several Yamadutas, the attendants of Yama's darkest region. Yamaraja himself was away on "business," and the attendants didn't know what to do with the young boy. Without offering him food or drink, they let him stay outside, virtually ignoring him.

When Yama returned after three days, he was humiliated, as the treatment of the boy went against all laws of Vedic hospitality, especially since he was a Brahmin. So Yama offered Nachiketas three boons, guaranteeing that he could have whatever he wished.

The first wish was that his father would forgive him and that he could return to Earth as if nothing had happened. Yamaraja laughed, assuring him that this was easy enough. The second was that Yama would teach Nachiketas the ritual fire, so loved by his father, which he did. No problem.

The third wish involves the substance of the entire Upanishad. Nachiketas asked Yama, "What is the secret of death?"

Yama was displeased. He told Nachiketas that not even the gods know the full truth. Still, the boy was insistent, showing his determination to know this ultimate secret of man's mortality. Indeed, the point of the Upanishad is that nothing is more important.

Yama then offered the boy riches, a beautiful wife, deep-rooted satisfaction, anything he wanted, and so on. Finally, the Lord of Death relented, beginning his lengthy sermon by saying that the secret of death is the secret of life.

We think we die, he told Nachiketas, because we think we are the same as these bodies. Once we learn what life really is, the soul and its relationship with God, death no longer affects us. We see our own true eternality and the nonexistence of our bodily demise.

Thus, the story leads to the deep philosophy of the soul and reincarnation, which is the heart of the Katha Upanishad.

The Bhagavad Gita

Interestingly, as Yama and young Nachiketas form the typical guru-disciple dynamic in the Katha Upanishad, Krishna and Arjuna play similar roles in the Bhagavad Gita. In fact, the Gita is often called the Gitopanishad because it emulates the traditional guru-disciple dialogue format of the Upanishads.

What is even more interesting, however, is that the Gita shares certain verses in common with the Katha Upanishad. Prabhupada notes the parallels in his commentary on the Gita (2.20), the translation of which reads, "For the soul there is never birth nor death. Nor, having once been, does he ever cease to be. He is unborn, eternal, ever-existing, undying and primeval. He is not slain when the body is slain." In his purport, Prabhupada writes:

> In the Katha Upanishad we also find a similar passage which reads:
>
> na jäyate mriyate vä vipaçcin
> näyaà kutaçcin na babhüva kaçcit
> ajo nityaù çäçvato 'yaà puräëo
> na hanyate hanyamäne çarére[18]
>
> The meaning and purport of this verse is the same as in the Bhagavad Gita…

Toward the end of Srila Prabhupada's purport on this same verse, he again shows the Gita's similarity with the Katha Upanishad by quoting another of its verses in full:

> Both the Supersoul (Paramatma) and the atomic soul (jivatma) are situated on the same tree of the body within the same heart of the living being, and only one who has become free from all material desires as well as lamentations can, by the grace of the Supreme, understand the glories of the soul.[19]

Though there are other teachings taken directly from the Katha Upanishad, such as the inverted banyan tree mentioned in the Gita's Fifteenth Chapter, the most obvious verses are these:

> "He who thinks that the living entity is the slayer or that he is slain, does not understand. One who is in knowledge knows that the self slays not nor is slain. For the soul, there is never birth nor death. Nor, having once been, does he ever cease to be. He is unborn, eternal, ever-existing, undying, and primeval. He is not slain when the body is slain."[20]

The Katha Upanishad version (11.18-20), which the Gita repeats almost verbatim, reads as follows:

> Unborn is he, eternal, everlasting and primeval–
> He is not slain when the body is slain.
> Should the killer think, 'I kill,'
> Or the killed think, 'I have been killed,'
> Both of these have incorrect knowledge.
> He kills not, nor is he killed.[21]

Lord Krishna, because He is God, need not quote the Vedas. His word is by definition the very meaning of truth. And yet He does refer to the scriptures, to show how knowledge is properly received. Throughout the Gita, in fact, He says, "as it is said," or "according to the sages," and so on. Many of these statements refer to the Katha Upanishad. Why? Because that Upanishad's main theme is life and death. And life and death were the subjects on which Arjuna needed clarity — he was about to engage in civil war, which would take the lives of many. Thus, his questions focused upon the meaning of existence and what death is really all about.

Conclusion

Both the Katha Upanishad and the Bhagavad Gita teach us four things about death.

1. The demise of the physical body is unavoidable and should thus not cause prolonged grief.
2. The subtle energy in the body, the soul, does not die, but rather takes on a new body according to its desire and actions.
3. The soul is birthless and deathless, and cannot be destroyed by any means.
4. One who focuses on God at the time of death will not be reborn, but will instead go to Krishna.

Most of all, we learn that to truly understand death, we must be open to what life really is. We must be willing to eschew our previous conceptions of who we are and become absorbed in our true Self — we must reintroduce ourselves to the spirit in the machine. For only by understanding what and who we are can we ever transcend death, once and for all.

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Part II: Vaishnava Practice

The Agni and the Ecstasy: My Initiation into Krishna Consciousness

July 10, 1975. It was a beautiful summer day. Although I was an exuberant twenty-year-old, I had no qualms about staying indoors on this occasion. I was being initiated into the ancient tradition of Krishna Consciousness by my spiritual preceptor: His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, the founder-acharya of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness.

I had been working toward this for some time. When I affiliated myself with the movement in 1973, my intention was to make a short experiment. I had just read Mahatma Gandhi's autobiography, My Experiments with Truth, and I romanticized how I would experiment in a similar way. Also, just before joining the movement, I had read Irving Stone's The Agony and the Ecstasy, a fictionalized account of Michelangelo's life. I was fascinated by the great Renaissance man's resolve to paint the Sistine Chapel upon the request of Pope Sixtus IV. Michelangelo's work as a painter for the Pope necessitated a mood of surrender, for he considered himself primarily a sculptor. I, too, had fancied myself something other than a devotee of God. I was a musician, an artist, and I loved to read. So I considered myself a sort of Renaissance man in my own right. But through reading Srila Prabhupada's profound works, translations of and commentaries on the ancient Vedic literature, I came to understand what I really wanted to pursue: God's mission in this world.

Before coming to Krishna Consciousness, I had read that religion originated in the East. Yoga groups and meditation centers back in America, while popular, did not satisfy my urge for a way of life that was completely spiritual. I took a short trip to India but returned dissatisfied. Traditional Hinduism seemed too dogmatic, with its many gods and family-based caste distinctions. Nonetheless, I knew that "Hinduism" had its roots in the Vedic literature, and I became interested in this source of spiritual truth. Knowing that the Vedas were written in Sanskrit, I decided to enroll in a Sanskrit course at Queens College in New York. If I could learn the language, I reasoned, then I could interpret the texts for myself, and I wouldn't have to rely on the commentaries of popular yogis and swamis.

My professor was using Srila Prabhupada's Bhagavad Gita as It Is. I had read many editions of the Gita, but only after reading Srila Prabhupada's version was I aware that Krishna is God Himself, and that the plurality of gods for which Hinduism is so infamous is a fairly recent innovation. For me, this was an important revelation: the religion upon which Hinduism rests is strongly monotheistic! I was also surprised to learn that caste distinction as interpreted by the British, and most modern Hindus, has little to do with what is actually taught in Vedic texts. While the popular misconception holds that one fits into a specific caste according to birthright, the Vedas, including its latter corollary texts like the Epics and Puranas, and especially the Bhagavad Gita, teach that one's quality and work determine one's social position. A person is considered a Brahmin, for instance, by virtue of his being an intellectual, not because he is born to a Brahmin father. This is clear from the Sanskrit texts themselves. So my Sanskrit course helped me see the logic of the Vedic literature and the accuracy of Prabhupada's translation and commentary. More important for me, however, was the realization that Prabhupada was not only delivering Bhagavad Gita "as it is," but was indeed espousing original Vedic/Vaishnava culture as it is. I knew this was what I had been looking for. As I became more familiar with the Sanskrit language and the ancient Vedic tradition to which it belongs, I became convinced of Srila Prabhupada's authenticity. I felt compelled to visit his Hare Krishna center in New York City, which was listed in the back of my Bhagavad Gita.

Luckily, on a rainy spring day in 1973, Srila Prabhupada was lecturing at the Henry Street temple in Brooklyn. It was my second visit to the temple, and although Srila Prabhupada was always traveling, he was there on that day. I understand now that this arrangement was Krishna's mercy upon me, because, being quite a skeptic, no one short of Srila Prabhupada himself could have convinced me of the validity of Krishna Consciousness. (In fact, however, it was meeting and conversing with many of his early disciples — amazing people in their own right — that convinced me of this path.) Although I came with a battery of questions regarding metaphysical reality and ontological truth, I did not come away disappointed. I was astounded by Srila Prabhupada's lecture. Without my asking, he had answered all my questions—and then some! Still, I maintained a healthy skepticism. The scriptures advise that one apply logic and reason in the pursuit of truth.

So, for a full year, I studied Srila Prabhupada's books closely, visited the temple, and asked questions. I adopted the basic practices of Krsna Consciousness: I started chanting the Hare Krishna mantra on beads every day, and I avoided meat-eating, illicit sex, intoxication, and gambling. Not that

strictness in following any of these lasted very long. Seeking happiness, I had formerly indulged in all of these activities on a regular basis. But somehow, I knew, true happiness was eluding me, no matter how successful I was in enjoying my senses. In retrospect, I think that my prior indulgence served to reinforce my resolve, for despite my sensual gratification, I was becoming less and less happy. Although I was engaging in the pleasures of the senses to numb the pain of material existence, it just was not working. Rather, I was becoming more and more entangled. The very activities I thought were bringing me pleasure and freedom were actually the source of my misery and bondage. I was embracing as the cure that which causes the disease.

In the beginning I faltered quite a bit. But as I became more steady in following the basic rules, I could feel my consciousness becoming purified. It gradually became easier to lead a purer life. Nonetheless, although things were becoming "easier," they were still a challenge, and I didn't know if I had what it takes to make a lifetime commitment. Despite this period of uncertainty and faltering, however, my experiments became more and more serious. In 1974, I saw Srila Prabhupada lecture at the Ratha-yatra (Festival of the Chariots) in San Francisco. After the lecture, Srila Prabhupada sang and danced with the devotees in glorification of God. He was happy, and everyone who watched him knew it. Here, I thought, is someone who practices what he preaches. This event solidified my faith in the process of Krishna Consciousness. I knew then and there that Srila Prabhupada was my spiritual guide and that I would one day be initiated by him. Whatever my reservations, I knew I had to make a commitment. If I didn't, I would be selling myself short.

As I became a more dedicated follower, I went out and distributed Srila Prabhupada's books on a daily basis. I wanted to share this treasure that had somehow been bestowed upon me. (Besides the fact that the temple leaders made it mandatory!) To this end, I eventually joined the Sri Sri Radha-Damodara Sankirtana Party, a team of devotees who were absorbed in distributing his literature and message to the world. We would also perform kirtan — call and response singing and dancing, glorifying Krishna's names — at college campuses through the States. My life was blissful.

February 28, 1975, was a cold day in Atlanta, Georgia. We had traveled there to meet with Srila Prabhupada, who was arriving from a successful lecture tour of Caracas and Miami. I was one of some three hundred enthusiastic devotees, both neophytes and more experienced disciples, who were there to greet Prabhupada. Although many of us were uninitiated, we had made a serious commitment, and there was talk that initiations would be forthcoming, and were perhaps six months away. For the next four days, we heard Srila Prabhupada lecture every morning, expounding the basic philosophy of Krishna Consciousness with unexcelled clarity and precision. Prabhupada knew that his explanations of the fundamentals would help his young novices preach to those whom they would meet on book distribution. By hearing Prabhupada explain the fundamentals in such a masterful way, I developed confidence in my own ability to convey the same truths to others.

During those early-morning winter lectures in Atlanta, an interesting phenomenon would occur on a daily basis: as I wanted to develop a more intimate relationship with Srila Prabhupada, I would plan out several deep, philosophical questions before his lecture. I had hoped that after his talks I would have the opportunity to ask these questions and revel in the spiritual exchange. Without my asking, however, he would invariably answer my specific questions during his lecture. Sometimes I would even purposely think of questions that had no relation to the daily topic. But the questions were always answered. By the fourth day, I was certain that this was more than mere coincidence. I was confident that, as my spiritual master, he knew my mind even better than I. As if in confirmation of this, after his lecture, he turned to me — I was sitting only a few feet away — and said, "Are all questions answered?" In response, I sat there with my mouth hanging open. Of course, it was not uncommon for him to say this at the end of his lectures, but in this instance, given what had been going on over the last few days, it was particularly meaningful, especially since he looked right into my eyes. It was fully appropriate, and for me it had very special meaning.

Before Srila Prabhupada was to leave Atlanta and we were to continue our travels throughout the country distributing his books, Tamal Krishna Goswami, the leader of our party, asked Srila Prabhupada if he would like to meet each of us. Wanting to give us special encouragement, Srila Prabhupada agreed. Though I had seen Prabhupada on several occasions, regularly listened to his tapes, and carefully studied his books, this would be the first time I would actually meet him. I was nervous and excited. While this meeting would be important and certainly pleasurable in many ways, I knew that it would deepen my commitment to the spiritual path. That prompted a sense of fear. Was I ready? The "agony and the ecstasy" motif entered my mind. Michelangelo wanted to sculpt, but in surrendering to the will of the Pope, he had sculpted a new life for himself as a painter. My eternal

spiritual father, whom I had by then acknowledged as such for a mere two years, was now going to enter my life in a more intimate and personal way.

As our Radha-Damodara Party danced through the door to his room singing the names of Krishna, I felt our relationship deepen — all of us as Godbrothers under our spiritual father, Srila Prabhupada. One after another, we were introduced to Prabhupada. We each offered him a fragrant flower, which he graciously accepted, and then we offered our prostrated obeisances, flat out on the floor. Prabhupada smiled with great delight as Tamal Krishna Goswami explained our respective services to him. "This is Tom," Tamal Krishna Goswami said. "He fixes the buses in which the devotees travel." Prabhupada nodded approvingly. "This is Danny. He does the cleaning. Mike assists with the cooking. Bob distributes your books." "Oh?" Prabhupada interrupted. "This is very nice!" It was clear that Prabhupada had a preference for seeing his books distributed. All other services were valuable in that they assisted this one service of transmitting transcendental knowledge and love of God.

I was up next. Also a book distributor, I felt somewhat confident that Prabhupada would be pleased with my service. "This is Steve," said Tamal Krishna Goswami, "and he distributes your books as well." No reaction. As I went to offer him the flower, I realized that the same phenomenon had occurred again. Since he had just expressed his delight with the previous book distributor, there was no need to say anything new to me. It was just like his answering my questions before I asked them. Still, after a few moments, Prabhupada looked up at me with folded hands and said, "Thank you very much." I immediately felt a spiritual reciprocation I had never felt before. He appreciated my service. And I appreciated his encouragement. In that moment, I realized that I was in the presence of my spiritual father.

Four months passed. We were traveling throughout the United States, delivering the message of Krishna Consciousness. It was early July, and we were told that Prabhupada would meet us in Chicago to formally initiate those of us who were true to our vows. Seventy-five young devotees would now strengthen their link with the Vedic tradition through the holy rite of initiation, and then we would all attend the 1975 Festival of the Chariots in Chicago. Again, we spent many mornings listening to Prabhupada lecture from Srimad Bhagavatam. This time, several hundred devotees gathered in the huge hall of the Evanston temple. Prabhupada took this opportunity to expound on the life of Ajamila, a reprehensible person who, at the time of death, had saved himself by calling out the name of God: "Narayana! Narayana!" Prabhupada enjoyed telling this story, for here the power of the holy name is evident. Ajamila had named his son Narayana, a name for God, and at the time of death Ajamila called out for the boy with full sincerity. Because he called the name of Narayana, he was saved from death and was given the chance to attain spiritual perfection. "Just see," said Srila Prabhupada. "This is the potency of the holy name. Even if chanted inadvertently, it has tremendous effect."

On the fourth day of Prabhupada's Chicago lectures, another miracle occurred. After repeating Narayana's name many times in telling the story of Ajamila, Srila Prabhupada fell into trance. This was something he rarely did in public. An intense silence engulfed the room. We all felt blessed to witness this transcendental phenomenon. Through purely calling out Narayana's name, in telling the story, Prabhupada was seeing Narayana face-to-face. His trance-like state and his inability to speak lasted two minutes. Although I had read about the ecstatic symptoms of a pure devotee, I was amazed to see them. Those of us who were in the room will never forget his spiritually uplifting expression, as tears rolled down his face. After two seemingly eternal minutes, Srila Prabhupada said, "All right. Thank you very much." He then gestured that kirtana should begin, and one of the most intense chanting sessions I had ever experienced permeated the large hall.

Then came the initiation. Anticipation filled my heart. My imagination went wild. I pictured sages in ancient times taking part in similar ceremonies on the banks of India's holy rivers. Now I would have the good fortune to follow in their footsteps. I looked forward to the exotic and colorful initiation ceremony, which includes a purificatory fire sacrifice. I had imagined this in my mind's eye for many months. The room would be filled with smoke from the flames of the ancient Vaishnava ceremony. I was familiar with the initiation procedure, for I had several months earlier been to the initiation of my senior Godbrothers and Godsisters. Each initiate would come before Srila Prabhupada, who would give him or her a set of chanting beads and a spiritual name. This name is usually one of the names of Krishna, or of one of His eternal associates, followed by the word dasa (for men) or devi-dasi (for women), both of which mean "servant." The name reminds the disciple that he or she is a servant of God.

Now my own initiation was about to take place. Srila Prabhupada started calling devotees one by one. There were seventy-five of us, so my fear was alleviated, somewhat, by the fact that I was not alone. Still, the agony-and-the-ecstasy concept ran through my mind as I thought of the sacrificial fire soon to be ignited. My entire life up to that moment of initiation ran before my eyes. Knowing that in Sanskrit, the fire is called the agni-hotra, I started to play mental word games: "The AGNI and the ecstasy," I thought. This was not a time to play games, however, and I made an internal promise to be more serious. The fire at such sacrifices is always a marvelous thing to behold. In this particular situation, however, I had mixed feelings. On the one hand, I could hardly wait for Srila Prabhupada to call my name, so we could get on with the beautiful fire sacrifice. On the other hand, I was nervous as hell! The commitment of life-long dedication is frightening. But I knew that one can get out of Krishna Consciousness only what one is ready to put into it. I had made up my mind.

To ease my tension, I had enjoyed watching several of Prabhupada's senior disciples spread colored dyes over the dirt mound in decorative crisscrosses, just prior to the sacrifice. "What is actually being sacrificed?" I began to ask myself. Surely it was mainly my false ego, my false sense of proprietorship. I was now acknowledging that I am not God but, rather, His blissful servant. "Ah, to be a servant of God," I thought, "this is no ordinary thing." No sooner was I thinking in this way than I heard someone call out my name. It was Tamal Krishna Goswami. He was calling me forward to be initiated by Srila Prabhupada. I took a deep breath and approached Prabhupada's seat. As he handed me the beads, he said, "Do you know the four rules?" "Yes," I answered. I had been practicing what to say so I wouldn't muff it. Then, the moment I had been waiting for: "Your name is Satyaraja." I immediately looked over at one of my traveling mates who knew Sanskrit better than I. "It means 'king of truth,'" he said. I looked back at Prabhupada with a sense of pride. Yes, this is me — I am the king of truth! I was glad Srila Prabhupada could recognize it. Prabhupada looked me squarely in the eyes and revealed the handy little affix with a stern voice: "Dasa!" Yes, of course: I was not the king of truth, but rather the servant of the king of truth. I felt two inches tall. Here I was, trying to remember that the real sacrifice was the sacrifice of my false ego, and Prabhupada had shown me, by pausing before saying "dasa," and then by delivering the word in his forceful, inimitable way, that I was still anxious to think of myself as something special. In short, I was inadvertently trying to be an imitation God. Prabhupada had lectured many times, explaining that this, in fact, is the very reason for our material existence: the endeavor to replace the Lord and become the central enjoyer of all we survey. Prabhupada taught me a valuable lesson at my initiation by reminding me that I was merely a humble servant of "the king of truth."

As I walked away from his seat with my beads and new name — Satyaraja dasa — I also walked away from the agony-and-the-ecstasy concept. The agony, I realized, was merely a product of my rebellion against God. Now, through Prabhupada's grace, I realized that I am constitutionally a servant of God. So the agony was gone. As I watched the sacrificial fire burn away, I knew all that was left was ecstasy.

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The Journey and the Signposts that Make it Doable, or, Krishna Consciousness: A Road Well Travelled

On a recent family trip, as I drove my trusty Subaru through unfamiliar terrain, a particular metaphor kept jumping to mind, so much so that I could only think it was a message from above.

We started out at night, and I realized my dependence on the white lines on the road. That's all I could see, and it kept me from getting into an accident.

As I drove, I thought about how all souls eventually come to a point in their lives when spirituality speaks to them. "After many births and deaths," Krishna tells us in the Bhagavad Gita (7.19), "he who is actually in knowledge surrenders unto Me, knowing Me to be the cause of all causes and all that is. Such a great soul is very rare."

This is a journey that generally begins "at night," in the sense that we are covered by ignorance when we initiate our search. We have little personal realization, and we make our way through instinct and sincere intent. But we have something else, too: the white lines, one on either side of the road.

In the search for transcendence, the white lines would be comparable to the guidance of a teacher (guru) and more experienced devotees (sadhu), on the one side, and the information given in sacred scriptures (shastra) on the other. These crucial guideposts are indispensable along the way. Since we begin with limited vision, we have little else to mark our path.

However, as we keep driving, as I did on that family trip, and as night turns to day, we come to see depth and extended surroundings. We get perspective and the ability to negotiate the road more effectively. I noticed that it was still prudent to stay between those white lines — indeed, it would be risky to go beyond them. But I could see that there was more to the road than rigid lines, and I could more easily or naturally make my way while accommodating them.

This is true in spiritual life, too. While a mature practitioner learns to adjudicate the day-to-day application of all she has learned and the practical minutiae of specific teachings, she is always mindful of the directions given by more experienced devotees, particularly the guru, and she is vigilant to follow the scriptures.

Still, the light is, well, illuminating, and makes driving more easily performed: "By the grace of Sri Chaitanya and Nityananda," we are told, "all darkness is removed, and the truth is brought to light. The Sun and Moon dissipate the darkness of the external world and thus reveal material reality. But these two brothers dissipate the darkness of the inner core of the heart, and thus help one to meet the two kinds of bhagavatas (Srimad Bhagavatam and the pure devotee)." (Chaitanya Charitamrita-Adi 1.85-99)

To drive on an unfamiliar road can be daunting, and it is wise to prepare ourselves for the journey. Roads and road systems can be very different from one side of town to another—and more so in different countries or continents. Similarly, various spiritual paths espouse differing procedures and methodologies for attaining transcendence, and it is wise to familiarize oneself with these things before embarking on the journey.

There are many things one can do to prepare for driving in different locales, especially in foreign lands. First, you can find out about regional standards and ordinances. In this way, you will know what otherwise unfamiliar signs are trying to tell you, and how you're supposed to deal with them. If you are aware of how you are expected to respond in a given area — can you make a right turn at a red light, or not? — you will have far greater driving confidence. Second, before you drive anywhere, familiarize yourself with your directions; don't just set out haphazardly and hope to see a signpost.

As far as the metaphor goes: this means knowing your chosen tradition. Educate yourself. In Krishna Consciousness, we encourage people to chant and to read Prabhupada's books. Ask devotees what to expect along the way — how, exactly, does one chant properly, what do various foreign words mean, and how can we follow certain regulative principles for maximum effect in the chanting process?

If we avail ourselves of this information, our journey can be a joyful experience, a wonderful ride to a blissful destination. Indeed, the testimony of countless pilgrims of the past, from gurus to sadhus to ordinary practitioners, makes it clear: Krishna Consciousness is a road well traveled. But you need to prepare yourself. Let others beep their horns if they want to — that's their business. You, at least,

should drive with confidence, because you know the rules of the road, where you are going, and exactly how to get there.

They Aim to Please: Dimensions of Service on the Path of Bhakti-yoga

Those who are spiritually advanced love to serve others. Bhakti-yoga, the path of devotional mysticism, is, in fact, all about devotional "service." This refers, chiefly, to serving Krishna, God (call Him/Her what you will), in a mood of love and devotion. But its implications go further than that. Krishna is all that is, and so service to humankind and all of God's creatures — as part and parcel of Krishna — is an important part of the Krishna tradition (and of all spiritual traditions).

And yet devotees don't do this in a shallow way. Rather, they consider who people really are and what service would best suit their needs. Let me explain.

The Taittiriya Upanishad describes five levels of the self, each one more subtle than the last — and also five ways to serve people on these various levels:

(1) The Physical Self (annamaya atman). This is the bodily conception of the self. Of the five material elements, this one engages earth, water, and fire, including the transformations and permutations of each, i.e., skin, saliva, and digestion, respectively. The body needs to be fed (i.e., anna, which means "food"), which is where the name annamaya comes from. If one believes that one is, in fact, only the body, one will only appreciate those services that facilitate bodily existence.

(2) The Energy Self (pranamaya atman). Here we address the more subtle dimensions of matter — air and space — especially as they relate to the five kinds of air within the body, the manipulation of which can affect the consciousness in various ways. It is this conception of self that is addressed in most yoga traditions: the inner person whose "breath" (as in pranayama), or vital functions, effects numerous urges of survival, such as reproduction, movement and self-expression.

(3) The Mental Self (manomaya atman). More subtle than gross matter, this conception of the self goes beyond the ethereal plane. "Information" takes precedence for a person whose self-identity centers about the mind, more so than in the two prior conceptions of self. Emphasis here is on mental impressions and the five kinds of sensory input. It is what distinguishes us as individuals, leading to ideas of diversity, individuality, and "I, me, and mine."

(4) The Intelligent Self (vijnanamaya atman). This refers to the higher mind, which discriminates, being fed by scriptural knowledge and practical realization. It is embodied by those who thrive on wisdom and the practical application of knowledge. It is the sheath of self associated with the organs of perception, allowing self-realization to emerge in its fledgling state.

(5) The Blissful Self (anandamaya atman). This is someone who identifies with his actual self, the soul within the body, and functions accordingly. The blissful sheath (anandamaya kosha) is a reflection of the Atman, which is bliss absolute.

The five corresponding levels of service, administered according to the realization of the person rendering the service, as well as to that of the person served, are important to understand.

(1) Physical help (anna dana). This is the lowest echelon of service, referring to bodily maintenance and assistance on the physical level. It is deeply appreciated by those on the annamaya platform, but its virtues are limited and temporary.

(2) Energetic help (prana dana). If you aid someone's inner life — usually accomplished through yoga and other disciplines that address the subtle energies within the body — you are serving them on the pranic level.

(3) Giving knowledge (vidya dana). This refers to factual knowledge related to the material world. Morals and ethics are important ways to serve on this level, nurturing people with sheer goodness. In its highest aspect, spiritual information is conveyed through scripture and the words of pure devotees.

(4) Giving realization (jnana dana). When one helps people implement basic spiritual principles, he helps them gain realization of transcendence. This is the beginning of spiritual life proper and a valuable service to perform for one and all. Teachers of spiritual science, using scripture and their own realization, love to serve others in this way.

(5) Giving devotion (bhakti dana). The best way to serve others, it comes in the form of direct devotional service to the Supreme Personality of Godhead. It is bestowed upon individuals only through the grace of Krishna's pure devotees, either directly or through his or her representatives.

While devotees of Krishna (yogis who focus on the Divine) are inclined to all forms of service, they are particularly interested in the latter two methods: jnana dana and bhakti dana. After all, the first three methods yield temporary results and will not help humankind with her ultimate problems: birth, death, old age, and disease.

Thus, devotees thrive on helping people study the scriptures, showing them how to implement its teachings, and on distributing knowledge and books that propound techniques for spiritual realization. Those on the path of bhakti try to offer the mercy of the pure devotees to others by sharing their realizations, and purifying one and all with the chanting of the holy name.

Their goal, I hope this article has shown, is to serve people in the best possible way.

Renunciation: A Little Redefining is in Order

We hear a lot of talk about renunciation these days. At least I do. I speak to a lot of people practicing yoga and various religious traditions, and renunciation is an important phenomenon in those milieus.

As commonly understood, renunciation refers to abstinence from various sorts of worldly pleasures. The idea is not about pointless denial, but to minimize bodily appetites for the purposes of attaining higher goals. It is usually thought that such minimization will lead to realization, helping practitioners to directly perceive the distinction between body and self. It is also supposed to help in the understanding that one need not be so dependent on material things. Rather, by doing without these things, we are told, we can more easily achieve our spiritual goals.

Along these lines, some forms of religion, both East and West, teach that renunciation can lead to salvation. The very act of renouncing worldly pleasures, they say, can affect one's psycho-physical make-up in such a way that attachment to the material world organically diminishes. This prepares the way for entrance into higher levels of consciousness, or even the spiritual world, depending on the religious tradition.

Many of the earliest patriarchs of the world's religions were indeed austere and exhibited a mood of renunciation, their avoidance of sensual pleasure serving as a model for later practitioners. Clearly, such renunciation, under proper guidance, can be helpful for many on the spiritual path, and numerous monks, history has shown us, have attained high levels of spirituality as a result of their ascetic endeavors.

But it is not for everyone. In Buddhism, for example, the tension between renounced monks and ordinary practitioners commonly comes to the fore. The question of whether one can properly practice outside of life in the monastery looms large. Clearly, renouncing the world in monastic fashion takes a certain mindset or disposition. But what of others not so blessed? What of those who are not given to a monastic way of life, but who are equally committed to the path — how will they attain the goals of their religion?

Of course, certain things must be renounced by anyone who wants to practice spirituality in any of its forms: Krishna explains that lust, anger, and greed must be dispensed with if one expects to make any advancement on the spiritual path. (Bhagavad Gita 16.21) This is true whether one is a monk, or living in the material world. Krishna further explains that renunciation is actually the same as yoga, or linking with the Supreme, for no one can be a yogi unless he or she renounces the desire for sense gratification. (6.2)

But this point merely begs the question: what does renunciation really mean, anyway? If it is merely about "giving up possessions" or "living in seclusion," as commonly understood, then it is basically about personal salvation, as opposed to reaching out. It is neglectful of compassion toward those who need it most. In other words, what are renunciants doing for others?

The ability to renounce, then, might be seen as a negative virtue with a self-interested emphasis. Indeed, the great Vaishnava saint Vallabhacharya wrote an entire treatise called Sannyasa-nirnaya, where he outlines the dangers of sannyasa (renunciation), saying that on the path of renunciation one can easily develop a holier-than-thou attitude, or become hard-hearted in terms of interacting with others in the material world, and Vedic texts even tell us that formal renunciation is forbidden in the age of Kali.[22]

However, the idea of Varnashrama, wherein one goes through various circumscribed stages of life, is an important component for those wanting to make spiritual progress, and usually quite helpful. I am not talking about the caste system. Rather, Varnashrama is a natural progression that begins with the path of being a celibate student (brahmacharya), graduating to householder life (grihastha), and finally, renunciation of the world as one prepares for death (vanaprastha, sannyasa). Still, all this being said, renunciation must be embraced intelligently and thoughtfully, not by rote or because of some system put into place by spiritual predecessors, but by considering essence over form.

In Vaishnavism, thankfully, the entire idea of renunciation is turned on its back, infusing it with a positivity that counterbalances the negative definition so common in the religious world. If there is any "giving up" to be done, it is about "giving up the lower for the sake of the higher, giving up the unreal for the sake of the real." The wise, we are told, "give up the impermanent to pursue the eternal." But not by running away. Rather, Vaishnavism teaches a more practical form of renunciation that focuses on engagement — on using the accoutrements of this world in the service of the Supreme.

It’s not about renunciation of action, but rather renunciation in action.

Vaishnava Renunciation

When exploring renunciation from the Vaishnava point of view, it is important to understand four Sanskrit words: vairagya (“dispassion,” “detachment”); yukta (“appropriate”); phalgu (“worthless” or “temporary”); and markaṭa (“monkey”).

The more positive kind of renunciation described above, wherein one does not run away, but instead engages the world in a spiritual way, is called yukta-vairagya. This is defined in Rupa Goswami’s Bhakti-rasamṛta-sindhu (1.2.255):

anäsaktasya viñayän
yathärham upayuïjataù
nirbandhaù kåñëa-sambandhe
yuktaà vairägyam ucyate

“Material possessions should be accepted for the Lord’s service and not for one’s personal sense gratification. If one accepts something (rather than gives something up) without attachment and sees its relation to Krishna, one’s renunciation is called yukta-vairagya.”

According to the Vaishnava tradition, this is the preferable form of renunciation, but Rupa Goswami explains the more common forms as well.

In the Bhakti-rasamrta-sindhu (1.2.256), the interchangeable markata-vairagya and phalgu-vairagya are defined as follows:

präpaïcikatayä buddhyä
hari-sambandhi-vastunaù
mumukñubhiù parityägo
vairägyaà phalgu kathyate

“When persons eager to achieve liberation renounce things related to the Supreme, thinking them to be material, their renunciation is called incomplete.” In other words, whatever is favorable for rendering service to the Lord should be accepted and should not be mistakenly rejected as something material.

Today, markata-vairagya, or false renunciation, is prevalent. The word markata, or “monkey,” is critical in understanding just why typical renunciation, wherein one rejects the material world, is inauthentic and incomplete.

Srila Prabhupada elaborates on this in his Chaitanya Charitamrita (Madhya-lila 16.238) purports:

> The word markata-vairagya, indicating false renunciation, is very important… Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura, in commenting on this word, points out that monkeys make an external show of renunciation by not accepting clothing and by living naked in the forest. In this way they consider themselves renunciants, but actually they are very busy enjoying sense gratification with dozens of female monkeys. Such renunciation is called markata-vairagya — the renunciation of a monkey. One cannot be really renounced until one actually becomes disgusted with material activity and sees it as a stumbling block to spiritual advancement. Renunciation should not be phalgu, temporary, but should exist throughout one’s life. Temporary renunciation, or monkey renunciation, is like the renunciation one feels at a cremation ground. When a man takes a dead body to the crematorium, he sometimes thinks, “This is the final end of the body. Why am I working so hard day and night?” Such sentiments naturally arise in the mind of any man who goes to a crematorial ghata. However, as soon as he returns from the cremation grounds, he again engages in material activity for sense enjoyment. This is called smasana-vairagya, or markata-vairagya.

Prabhupada goes on to explain how renunciation is at the heart of Lord Krishna’s teaching in the Bhagavad Gita. But whereas Arjuna, the hero of the Gita, initially thought that he should renounce the battle before him — a form of renunciation that would have been the height of irresponsibility, costing millions of lives — Krishna told him that he should, in fact, engage in the battle, but viewing it as a form of yoga, as service to the Supreme. This, He said, was real renunciation.

Bhagavad Gita

If one studies the Bhagavad Gita carefully, one finds that renunciation plays a prominent role throughout. And at the time of Lord Krishna, the word conjured many of the same images it does

today: solemn practitioners performing austere religious vows, cloistered from the world, living a monastic life.

But Krishna was teaching a Nava-vairagya, a new renunciation, so to speak, wherein truly renouncing meant freeing oneself from selfish ties to the material world, not from the world itself. He speaks to Arjuna of an inner renunciation that allows one to receive and to let go at the same time. Unlike the renunciants of old — who, it might be argued, did not fully live or enjoy life — Krishna teaches that real renunciation involves rejecting, not life, but the selfishness that leads to exploitation, affecting our relationship with the world around us. He asks us to seek a certain purity in thought, word and deed, allowing us to interact with the world in an appropriate (yukta) way, acknowledging its Creator and proper utilization. Krishna calls this nishkama karma, "selfless action."

These teachings are found in the Gita's Fifth Chapter, where Arjuna asks Krishna to explain which is more beneficial: the renunciation of work/action (karma-sannyasa) or work/action for God (nishkama-karma-yoga). Krishna explains that while both are good, action for God is better. "Unless one is engaged in the devotional service of the Lord," He says, "mere renunciation of activities cannot make one happy. The sages, purified by works of devotion, achieve the Supreme without delay." (BG 5.6) In fact, this is where Rupa Goswami and the other Vaishnava acharyas get the idea of yukta-vairagya — from the Gita's teaching that active devotion is the heart of true renunciation.

Prabhupada concludes (BG 18.11):

> It is said in Bhagavad Gita that one can never give up work at any time. Therefore he who works for Krishna and does not enjoy the fruitive results, who offers everything to Krishna, is actually a renouncer. There are many members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness who work very hard in their office or in the factory or some other place, and whatever they earn they give to the Society. Such highly elevated souls are actually sannyasis and are situated in the renounced order of life.

Prabhupada is not saying that his disciples who work in the world are necessarily formal sannyasis — they are not — but rather that they embody the essence of what true renunciation is really all about: devotional service to the Supreme. In other words, the Gita teaches that the "perfection of renunciation" — which, by the way, is the title of its concluding chapter — is to use the accoutrements of the material world in a spiritual way, to take God's energy and to use it in the service of He who provided that energy.

Concluding Thoughts

If we think deeply about the typical conception of renunciation — about the via negativa perspective of "the world" as a nasty place, to be abandoned in favor of a reclusive life — we see that it has certain merits, that it is advantageous in particular stages of life, and that monkhood has its place in the spiritual scheme of things.

But let us consider: what is this "material world" that religionists are so eager to reject, this vilified enemy of all that is good and spiritual? For many, the world is but a metaphor for misery, for innumerable attachments, and for birth, death, old age, and disease. And, indeed, this is one side of what the world really is, and for that reason, there is definite logic to the path of traditional renunciation.

Let it also be said, however, that the world is really so much more than that: it is the energy of God, and it is to be used in His service. A knife can be used to kill someone, but it can also be used for a delicate operation, to save someone's life. And like a knife, the world is a double-edged sword.

Someone might argue that traditional renunciants tend to engage Krishna's direct spiritual energy, leaving behind the accoutrements of this world, whereas others, engaged in devotional service "in the material world," are engaging His material energy, which is inferior. But Krishna will have none of that. To Him, His energies are equal.

Indeed, if energy comes from God, it is ultimately spiritual. "For example," Prabhupada tells us, "electricity can produce heat, and it can cool also. A refrigerator is worked by electricity, and a heater is also worked by electricity. So, we may say, 'This is heat-producing electricity, and that is cold-producing electricity.' But for the powerhouse there is no such distinction: it is all simply electricity. Similarly, for Krishna there is no superior or inferior energy."[23]

Thus, under the direction of a qualified spiritual master, one can learn the art of using the material world, which is merely a particular transformation of Krishna's energy, in His divine service. This, indeed, is a form of renunciation that need not be renounced.

Least But Not Last:
A Few Words on Humility

I recently heard a woman say, "least but not last." She meant to say the usual, "last but not least," but somehow, due to a slip of the lip, or perhaps because of some mild form of dyslexia, she inverted the words in this somewhat humorous way. And this got me thinking about humility, which people sometimes confuse with low self-esteem, thus viewing it as an inferior quality. To think of oneself as "least" is the last thing one would want to do.

Our Vaishnava tradition, however, exalts humility as among the greatest qualities: "Humility may vanquish might, humility may vanquish weakness. There is nothing that humility may not accomplish. Therefore, humility is greater than it initially seems." So says the great Prahlad Maharaja in the epic Mahabharata (Book 3, Chapter 28).

Just as people tend to confuse humility with low self-esteem, there are those who correlate its opposite, high self-esteem, with pride and self-absorption. But this is also far from true. People with a healthy sense of self-esteem generally exhibit a humble attitude in relation to others. Their egos are not threatened by admitting and correcting mistakes, although those who truly have low self-esteem tend to be defensive and often feel compelled to prove they are right.

Humility, in fact, is a quality that is lauded in all the great religions of the world, even if practitioners are not always able to live up to it. As an example, one need merely look to the Christian tradition. In the work of St. Thomas Aquinas, the famous Thirteenth-century Catholic philosopher, we find that the word itself is derived from the Latin humilis, which means "low, humble, from the earth." He also declares that humility is a cardinal virtue "which assists in keeping oneself within one's own bounds, not reaching beyond one's limitations, but submitting to one's superior."[24]

Christian teaching tells us that humility is the foundation of true spirituality. It is equally as important as faith. In fact, humility is sometimes considered even more important because it has a tendency to remove various obstacles that keep practitioners from actually attaining faith. Further, humility is said to break down one's sense of pride, thus making it easier to achieve God's grace. According to the words of St. James, "God will resist the proud, and instead give his grace to the humble" (James 4:6).

A humble person is understood as being unpretentious and modest: someone who does not think that he or she is better or more important than others. Extrapolating freely, it becomes clear why this is a significant quality for spiritual practitioners.

Humility and Krishna Consciousness

The Chaitanya Charitamrita (Madhya-lila 22.78–80) lists twenty-six qualities that are incumbent upon a serious practitioner. Amani, meaning "humble," or "free from false prestige," is one of them. In our Krishna-conscious tradition, such humility has deep implications, ranging from a respectful or even reverential mood toward God, nature, and all living beings, to not wanting to be worshipped by others — not usurping God's position, either grossly or subtly. Humility should not be artificial, but honest and natural. Various scriptural passages confirm its importance in terms of not engaging false prestige (Chaitanya Charitamrita, Madhya 22.80); not desiring inordinate respect for oneself (Srimad Bhagavatam 5.18.12 purport); a general humble disposition (Srimad Bhagavatam 4.20.16 purport); and bidding adieu to pride (Srimad Bhagavatam 2.3.13 purport).

In the Bhagavad Gita (13.8–12), Lord Krishna, describing a person who is truly in possession of knowledge, presents a list of ethical and moral values, including humility, which is listed first. Its pride of place has deep meaning in the Vaishnava tradition.

Surpassing all scriptural quotations for the importance of humility, we find the teachings of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, Krishna Himself in the guise of his own devotee, offering the loudest proclamation. In the Chaitanya Charitamrita, He says:

ye-rüpe la-ile näma prema upajaya
tähära lakñaëa çuna, svarüpa-räma-räya

"O Svarupa Damodara Gosvami and Ramananda Raya, hear from Me the symptoms of how one should chant the Hare Krishna maha-mantra to awaken very easily one's dormant love for Krishna.'" (CC Antya 20.20)

tåëäd api su-nécena
taror iva sahiñëunä
amäninä mäna-dena
kértanéyaù sadä hariù

"One who thinks himself lower than the grass, who is more tolerant than a tree, and who does not expect personal honor but is always prepared to give all respect to others can very easily always chant the holy name of the Lord." (CC Antya 20.21)

uttama haïä äpanäke mäne tåëädhama
dui-prakäre sahiñëutä kare våkña-sama

"These are the symptoms of one who chants the Hare Krishna maha-mantra. Although he is very exalted, he thinks himself lower than the grass on the ground, and like a tree, he tolerates everything in two ways." (CC Antya 20.22)

våkña yena käöileha kichu nä bolaya
çukäïä maileha käre päné nä mägaya

"When a tree is cut down, it does not protest, and even when drying up, it does not ask anyone for water." (CC Antya 20.23)

yei ye mägaye, täre deya äpana-dhana
gharma-våñöi sahe, änera karaye rakñaëa

"The tree delivers its fruits, flowers and whatever else it possesses to anyone and everyone. It tolerates scorching heat and torrents of rain, yet it still gives shelter to others." (CC Antya 20.24)

uttama haïä vaiñëava habe nirabhimäna
jéve sammäna dibe jäni' 'kåñëa'-adhiñöhäna

"Although a Vaishnava is the most exalted person, he is prideless and gives all respect to everyone, knowing everyone to be the resting place of Krishna." (CC Antya 20.25)

i-mata haïä yei kåñëa-näma laya
çré-kåñëa-caraëe täìra prema upajaya

"If one chants the holy name of Lord Krishna in this manner, he will certainly awaken his dormant love for Krishna's lotus feet." (CC Antya 20.26)

In other words, humility is important not only in our day-to-day affairs, but it is also essential in developing love for God.

The Chaitanya Charitamrita continues:

As Lord Chaitanya spoke in this way, His own humility increased, and He began praying to Krishna that He could discharge pure devotional service." (CC Antya 20.27)

Thus, showing by His own example how an ordinary soul on the path of Krishna consciousness should pray, existing in a mood of true humility, Mahaprabhu paves the way for all practitioners, then and now.

Conclusion

Ultimately, humility refers to realizing one's position as a tiny jiva — a spirit-soul — part and parcel of Krishna, a servant of the servant of the Lord. But, in this world, the jiva's conditioning and materialistic ego are often difficult to overcome. The desire for name, fame, wealth, position, profit, adoration, distinction and gain has a tremendous hold over us, afflicting our consciousness and influencing almost everything we do. Oftentimes, our arrogance seems unconquerable.

Still, by associating with truly advanced spiritual practitioners — the guru and other serious devotees — and by hearing the words of scriptures, we can attain true humility in due course. But we have to want it. We have to be honest with ourselves and admit that we need it.

Honesty and truthfulness, then, are two essential elements of humility. They manifest as one's ability to honestly assess oneself, to recognize and admit one's own faults and defects as a conditioned jiva, and to admit the truth of one's compromised situation. Sadly, many of us try to create a false image of ourselves, both to posture, to convince ourselves of our own greatness, and to manipulate others into believing that we are great, too. Only through internal honesty can we begin to make real progress in spiritual life. Thus, to clean out the conditioning that has accumulated in the heart over many lifetimes, one has to first recognize its presence, to admit that it is there, and then to do what needs to be done: to remove it in all earnestness. Without such truthfulness, how can we make tangible progress in developing humility?

Balancing Faith and Works: To Whom is God's Grace Given?

In 1967, Lilavati Dasi, though a relatively new yogini, was fortunate enough to accompany Srila Prabhupada, her guru, on a morning walk. Ecstatic that she would stroll side-by-side with her spiritual master, the car ride to the walking area was anything but pleasurable: her newborn baby, it seems, first in a carrier on her back and then transferred to her lap for the duration of the ride, made the trip somewhat difficult. Prabhupada noticed her struggling to get in and out of the car.

"So, there are two ways to carry a baby," he began, tapping his cane on the ground as he and a close group of disciples, including Lilavati, made their way down a dirt road. "There is the monkey way and the cat way. Do you know this?"

"No, Swamiji," said Lilavati. As a newcomer to the Vaishnava tradition, it was unlikely that she knew what Prabhupada was referring to — an age-old debate about the comparative efficacy of faith and works in the Ramanuja Vaishnava tradition. Cats represent faith and monkeys works, for reasons that will soon unfold.

"Well, which way do you think is better?" Prabhupada asked, insisting that his fledgling disciple answer him. He continued, "The monkey baby climbs on the back of the mother and holds on, and this is the way he travels. And the kitten is carried in the teeth of the mother. So which is better?"

Lilavati still had difficulty determining who had a better position, the monkey baby that had to work hard to hold on or the kitten that had nothing to do at all; nor could Lilavati understand how all this might be applied to the yoga of Krishna consciousness.

"Well," Prabhupada said, "the monkey baby is very small and very weak, and he is holding onto the mother by his own strength. But the kitten is being supported by the strength of the mother. So which way do you think is better?"

And then Lilavati understood: "The cat way is better."

"Yes," Prabhupada said, "that is the difference between the yogi and the devotee. The yogi is trying to climb on the back of the Absolute Truth by his own strength, but he is very weak, so he will fall. But a devotee cries out for Krishna (God), and Krishna picks him up."

Though in this instance, Srila Prabhupada clearly endorses the cat part of the analogy, he elsewhere shows the importance of the monkey side of things. After all, Krishna's entire instruction to Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita revolves around the importance of doing one's duty — of performing proper action in Krishna Consciousness (karma-yoga), as opposed to merely having faith and leaving the hard work for God to do — and in Prabhupada's purports, he repeatedly supports this approach. In his commentary to 8.7, for example, he writes, "The Lord does not say he [Arjuna] should give up his prescribed duties or engagements. One can continue them, and at the same time think of Krishna by chanting Hare Krishna." So Prabhupada ultimately supports both faith and works.

Philosophical Background

The Ramanujites, in South India, elevated the tension between faith and works to a full-fledged philosophical conundrum, resulting in two factions. The Vatakalai branch, championed by Vedanta Deshika (1268–1368), teaches that salvation or self-surrender comes about when there is both divine grace and human effort, with a special emphasis on effort. This is comparable, again, to a mother monkey carrying her baby. The mother does most of the work, but the baby must take some initiative to hang on as well. On the other hand, the Tenkalai school, represented by Pillai Lokacharya (1264–1369), claims that God's grace alone saves the soul, much like a cat carries its kitten — the baby kitten is virtually inactive, with very little effort on its part required.

Like Prabhupada, the Vatakalai and the Tenkalai appreciate both works and faith, but the two Ramanuja schools have built entire philosophical systems according to their particular emphases.

The same tension exists in Christianity: the question, basically, concerns the methodology by which the faithful can be saved from sins, enabling them to go to heaven when they die. Early Christian theologians opined that we qualify for salvation through good deeds, observing sacred rites and traditions, and being obedient to the commandments of the church. Martin Luther (1484–1546), however, promulgated the idea that we attain salvation merely through faith in God. This, of course,

gave rise to the dogmatic position, so popular among certain Christian groups today, that simple belief in Jesus is enough for salvation.

The scriptural quotes used by both factions are many, but it comes down to the following. On the one hand: "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God." (Ephesians 2:8) And yet: "Faith without works is dead…" (James 2:26.) Thus, modern Christianity has its own version of the Vatakalai/Tenkalai dichotomy. But in the end, most Christians and Vaishnavas would agree: faith does not exist where it does not manifest itself as works.

Conclusion

To whom is God's grace given? Can it be earned? Or is it bestowed according to His sweet will?

For an impartial seeker after truth, both these viewpoints appear reasonably sound, and both have their place in the pursuance of the spirit. It seems reasonable that we must make some effort to earn God's grace, demonstrating through our own actions the depth of our sincerity and our strength of purpose. On the other hand, what can one really do to truly merit something as glorious as divine grace? A contemporary story might help to clarify: once, a devotee went to a spiritual adept who could perform miracles and asked him, "Swami! My mother is ill. Can you cure her of her disease?" The Swami replied: "All right. But first, have you taken her to a doctor?"

"No, I haven't," said the hopeful devotee.

The Swami, incredulous, responded, "If you have not done the minimum expected of you, what can I do?"

The message should be clear. Even the "cat" school of thought requires endeavor: when the mother cat takes the kitten in her mouth, a kind of cooperation on the part of the kitten is required. If the kitten refuses to be carried by its mother, what can the well-meaning mother cat do? The implications, in terms of the cat-monkey debate, are: we must be conscious that, without God's grace, nothing gets accomplished; yet we should also be willing to make every personal effort possible to achieve our spiritual goals.

Another analogy might make it clearer still: a person is drowning in a deep well. Someone throws a rope from on high, and the drowning person grabs onto the rope and climbs up, while simultaneously being pulled from the top. Here the person is delivered out of the well by his personal endeavor of holding onto the rope — but he wouldn't be able to do it without the mercy of the person who pulls the rope from above.

Prabhupada's own resolution to the dilemma can be seen in his translation of the word bhakti. Unlike most Western scholars who feel justified in translating the word merely as "devotion," which is perfectly legitimate from a linguistic perspective, Prabhupada prefers to explain the word's implications in his translation; he therefore renders it as "devotional service," implying that, along with the sentiments of the heart, there must be action. We see here not just devotion or love, but devotion and love manifesting as an event, or a series of events. We endorse the faith of the kitten but ask for the willingness of the baby monkey.

Thus, the yogic path of Krishna consciousness sides with neither of the two extremes. Complete perfection in spiritual life is achieved by a combination of both views. One's positive efforts to please the Lord through His representative, the spiritual master, work in tandem with our ardent prayers for the Lord's interceding grace. This combination of positive endeavor and total dependency on the mercy of Krishna leads to "deliverance" (or in Vaishnava terms, freedom from rebirth and a return to our original state of loving service to God). This was nicely expressed by Saint Augustine, who said that a true devotee of the Lord should "pray as if everything depends on God and work as if everything depends on you."

The proper balance of monkey-like behavior and cat-like dependency leads to healthy spiritual progress.

Writing for Krishna: An Interview with Satyaraja Dasa[25]

Back to Godhead **magazine (BTG): How were you introduced to Krishna Consciousness?**
Satyaraja Dasa (SD): I remember the day I received Bhagavad Gita as It Is as if it were yesterday, although it was more than forty years ago. That's the book that changed my life. I was on the train on my way home from school at the High School of Art and Design. At the time, I was reading a popular translation of the Gita, when a Hare Krishna devotee approached me (Madhusudana Dasa, one of Prabhupada's very first disciples). He was asking for donations, and he was selling, of all things, copies of Bhagavad Gita as It Is, Srila Prabhupada's Gita. What that devotee said to me, I'll remember for the rest of my life: "You're reading poison!" he exclaimed. I was shocked.

"The Gita is as pure as milk," he continued, "but even milk becomes poison when touched by the lips of a serpent." I could understand that he was criticizing the particular translation I was reading. I had misgivings about this edition myself, as only the first six chapters were translated. Why would the translator leave out the remaining twelve chapters? Agreeing with the devotee that something was amiss, I accepted a copy of Bhagavad Gita as It Is, which he gave me gratis.

Srila Prabhupada's Gita was unique. Unlike other editions — and by this time, I had read many — it provided me with a clear understanding of the personalities involved and of the entire Gita, along with its essential teachings. The Gita's clear, and almost simple message became apparent: surrender unto Krishna, God. And Srila Prabhupada was the first to give this direct and obvious meaning of the Gita. It became apparent that many of the other translators and commentators were missing the essence of the Gita. Anyway, that was my introduction. I then enrolled in a Sanskrit course at Queens College, just to verify that Prabhupada's translation was accurate. I found that it caught the spirit of the text…

BTG: Did your interest in writing precede, parallel or succeed your introduction to Krishna Consciousness? How did you take up writing as your life's service and mission?
SD: I was a musician and an artist before joining the movement. In fact, I had little interest in writing. Nothing to speak of, anyway. It wasn't until the early 1980s that Adi-kesava (then Swami), who was at that time the Governing Body Commissioner of New York, noticed how much I loved to share the philosophy of Krishna Consciousness with others. He suggested that I start a local newsletter for the devotees in the area. He said that I should include newsy things, but also philosophy, so that in this way the newsletter would be a good outlet for me to express the philosophy to the devotees, to the congregation members, and to all kinds of people affiliated with ISKCON in the greater New York area.

So that's what I did. And it became popular, not only in New York, but throughout the East Coast of America. Gradually, the late Suhotra Swami started reading my articles in the newsletter, and he liked them so much that he had them translated into German. He used them regularly in Wie es Ist, which was sort of a German Back to Godhead–type magazine. Finally, Satsvarupa Maharaja started reading my articles, and he asked me to write for Back to Godhead. This would have been in the mid-1980s. So that's how it all started. Also, Srila Prabhupada's Godbrother, Dr. O. B. L. Kapoor, asked me to write a single-volume biography of Lord Chaitanya. After consulting with various Godbrothers, I did it. That was my first real book, India's Spiritual Renaissance: The Life and Times of Lord Chaitanya.

BTG: In our tradition, who among our acharyas **are your inspiration as exemplary devotee-writers?**
SD: Oh, I would have to give you three primary answers: Bhaktivinoda Thakura, Bhaktivinoda Thakura, and, Bhaktivinoda Thakura. [laughter] He was and is my major inspiration. Remember, he was from a Shakta (worshippers of Goddess Durga) family and thus, at least to external vision, came to Vaishnavism later in life. So he is very much like we Westerners, who were not born into Vaishnava families. Also, as a grihastha (married person), he sets the example of writing while maintaining a family and interacting with the "real" world. This is significant. It is a model that most of us can follow. It is someone who knows the struggles of the everyday person, yet lives a life of perfect Krishna Consciousness.

So, in my writing and in my approach to Vaishnavism, I try to follow that example. Naturally, I fall short of such an exalted example, terribly short. But, in any case, we try. Of course, Srila Prabhupada,

too, is a major example in our line. He was 100% dedicated to his books and to the propagation of Krishna Consciousness through the written word. His life and teachings, especially his emphasis on book distribution, have been a major inspiration to me. I write for him, and I pray he is satisfied by my humble endeavor.

BTG: You are one of the most prolific writers in our movement and are also one of the prominent writers on Vedic culture globally. How did you get your early breaks in your service as a writer? What are the major landmarks in your growth as a devotee-writer?

SD: Hmm. My second book, Food for the Spirit: Vegetarianism and the World Religions , remained in manuscript form for quite a while; I just couldn't find a publisher. Then, I heard that Isaac Bashevis Singer, who had won the 1978 Nobel Prize for Literature, was in fact himself a vegetarian. So I decided to look up his management company and send him the manuscript, just to get his opinion and, at best, a brief endorsement. Well, in the end, he liked the manuscript so much that he took it upon himself to write a Foreword for the book. Needless to say, that simple event succeeded in putting me on the map as a writer.

Various publishers began fighting over the book. For various reasons, I eventually went with Bala Books. And, years later, it was reprinted under another title, Diet for Transcendence, by Torchlight Publishing.

I must say, another breakthrough book for me was Gita on the Green: The Mystical Tradition Behind Bagger Vance. This was my commentary on Steven Pressfield's golf novel that used the Bhagavad Gita as its basis. The book allowed me to explain the entire Gita in a way that non-seekers could understand and appreciate from our parampara point of view. This book was important for me because it was my first book with a major press. If we, as devotees, only self-publish, or publish only through our own publishing companies, we will only attract people who are predisposed to Krishna Consciousness, or seekers of various stripes. To many, such works appear "in-house," and so they take them with a grain of salt. But if we can get qualified and experienced authorities and publishers to acknowledge our work, then we can get a wider audience. This is what happened with Gita on the Green. It was picked up by Continuum International, a major press that does crossover books, in terms of doing scholarly books that also have trade appeal, catering to a popular audience. Next thing I knew, I was getting invitations to do radio talk shows, magazine articles, live engagements at yoga studios, and so on. It allowed me to develop an outside presence and gave me the ability to reach a wider audience. So this began happening about one decade ago, with the publication and popularization of Gita on the Green.

Important, too, is my recent connection with Sri Nathji Dasa (Dr. N. D. Desai). We have conceived a number of projects together, including a book on Christ and Krishna,[26] which is now completed, and we may be publishing a number of others as well. For now, I am working on a massive Vaishnava Encyclopedia for him. It will be a large, two-volume set, detailing the personalities, sacred places, terminology, and texts of the Vaishnava tradition. This will include not only the Gaudiya Vaishnava sampradaya, but all Vaishnava lineages. In fact, there is no other encyclopedia like this in any language. Of course, there is the Sri Gaudiya Vaishnava Abhidhana , by Haridas Das. This is a great work, no doubt, but it is as yet only available in Bengali, not in English. And its focus is Gaudiya Vaishnavism. Our book will have a broader base, and it will be in English, for a contemporary audience. It's really a very exciting project.

Another major break came through the grace of Professor-Father Frank Clooney, Jesuit Priest and Harvard Professor. You see, in the interim, I had developed a name in the academic world through my founding of the Journal of Vaishnava Studies (JVS), which is a thematic refereed journal, highly respected now in the field. Each issue is about 200 pages and thoroughly covers a particular theme, whether the Gita, the Bhagavatam, Vaishnava Women, a particular sampradaya, or whatever.

We've been in publication now for almost 20 years straight, with every major research library and university in the world on our subscriber list. In any case, some years back, a major academic press (Praeger-Greenwood) had asked Clooney to write a high school textbook on Hinduism, and, I guess because he was busy, and because, through the Journal, he had developed faith in me, he told them that "Steve Rosen is your man; he's the guy to do it." So, on his recommendation, they came to me.

I not only wrote the book, which is part of a series on world religions, but I parlayed it into two books! I told them that I would do the textbook for them, but that there was a great need for a book to teach professors, not just students, how to teach Hinduism. And that its first objective must be to show that Hinduism is a misnomer! They were interested. So I wrote Essential Hinduism after the textbook.

Both books did very well, and they continue to sell. As it now stands, I have written five books for them, and they want me to continue. I am their "Hindu" man! [laughter]

BTG: Prabhupada would say that Krishna Consciousness is transcendental to all worldly designations, including religious designations like Hindu, Muslim and Christian, yet people generally (mis)identify devotees with Hindus. How do you deal with this in your writings?
SD: Good question. In many of my books, I deal with the fact that the words "Hindu" and "Hinduism" are inaccurate. They are terms of convenience, at best. Of course, historically, and geographically, people tend to identify Krishna Consciousness, or Vaishnavism, with India and, of course, Hinduism. But people, especially scholars, are now learning that Hinduism is just a layman's term for the religions of India, and there are many: Shaivism, Shaktism, Vaishnavism, and so on, with different scriptures, conceptions of God, practices, and so on.

Krishna Consciousness is distinct in that it is the science of love of God. This was Prabhupada's point: Krishna Consciousness is the post-graduate science of spirituality. In other words, its methods and practices could be used to enhance one's practice regardless of one's tradition. No matter what religion or sect or culture one has aligned themselves with, the process of Krishna Consciousness will be helpful for them. This is because it is truly sanatana dharma, or the eternal function of the soul.

BTG: The scholarly Journal of Vaishnava Studies **that you pioneered is a somewhat unique project that helped focus academic study on Vaishnavism. How did that start off? From your experience as the pioneer of JVS, what are the aspects of Vaishnavism in general and Gaudiya Vaishnavism in particular that strike a chord with the intellectual and aesthetic sensibilities of our times?**
SD: It started in 1992, a simple conversation between me and Pradyumna Dasa, whom Prabhupada used to call "Panditji." We agreed that Vaishnavism was becoming more and more known in the academy, and that some of these scholars were doing important research. Also, we noted that more and more devotees were doing research in an academic environment. So we wanted an outlet for this important information. So I started to do it, virtually single-handedly. It is now the preeminent scholarly journal in the field, with professional scholars worldwide endorsing it and quoting from it in their books and research.

What strikes a chord? Educated people are seeing how deep Vaishnavism goes. Intellectually, it has something to offer all other religious traditions. This is not a biased value judgment or some prejudiced opinion. Anyone who makes a thorough comparative study would agree. If they look at the work of Rupa Goswami, Jiva Goswami, or Vedanta Desika, or any of the amazing scholars and philosophers of the bhakti tradition, they will naturally be impressed. It is uncanny what our Vaishnava philosophers have come up with. I ask only that people avail themselves of this knowledge. They will find it strikingly wonderful.

BTG: What advice would you like to give to upcoming devotee-writers?
SD: They should remember the ABCs of good writing: Accuracy, Brevity, and Clarity. These are essential principles. Say what you need to say, don't overly embellish, and be clear. Additionally, read some good books on writing and grammar. That's also essential. Learn the science of writing. These are material qualifications, no doubt. Spiritually, always write something that contributes to the greater understanding of Vaishnava truth; don't write the same, hackneyed thing again and again. Be creative, but be authorized, expressing legitimate truths. How to do this? Know siddhanta. Study Prabhupada's books. Stick closely to parampara, but express it in your own way.

Also, I would ask them to remember that writing is a form of kirtana. It is celebrating and glorifying Krishna and, for this reason, it is a glorious activity. Don't be afraid to write and write and write, because that's how you're going to get good at it. Read other writers, too. It's essential. And always go to experienced devotee writers for criticism and emendation. I remember in my early days, I used to go to Satsvarupa Maharaja and Jayadvaita Maharaja. I would get my articles back with big, red lines across entire sections. "Delete this and delete that." Sometimes it was discouraging. But you know what? It taught me how to write. And I am grateful for it.

Ayurveda and the Science of Spiritual Relationships

The subject of my literary career has been spiritual health, but I also recognize the body's central role in my day-to-day spiritual activities, and that proper bodily care is fundamental to the spiritual quest. After all, if one doesn't properly care for one's bodily vehicle, it becomes increasingly difficult to perform even basic spiritual practices. This is not to say that it is impossible to chant, pray, and so on, even in compromised health. But it is certainly an asset to have a sound body and mind. In fact, this is why the sages of ancient India practiced yoga: to enhance their psycho-physical condition. And then they used their enhanced bodily vehicle in pursuit of the spirit.

Ayurveda, as you all know, was conceived and developed with a similar strategy in mind. Its purpose is to allow us to function at optimum level, so that we might use our God-given body in the Lord's divine service. So, first, I will outline my understanding of Ayurveda, and then explore how it relates to Gaudiya Vaishnavism. I should begin by pointing out that my teacher, His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, while a supporter of Ayurveda, used to say that, "The Ayurveda-shastra recommends, aushadhi chintayet vishnum: 'Even while taking medicine, one should remember Vishnu [Krishna],' because the medicine is not all-in-all — and Lord Vishnu is the real protector." So, from our point of view, Ayurveda is a significant form of holistic medicine, but it is our secondary form of shelter. That is to say, we depend first and foremost on God. Ayurvedic treatment, for us, is necessarily a secondary concern.

What is Ayurveda?

Ayurveda is perhaps the oldest system of natural healing in the world, predating even the Chinese system of medicine. The word Ayurveda is Sanskrit, and is generally understood to mean "the knowledge of life" (veda = knowledge; ayu = life). But I would re-translate it as "the knowledge of longevity." I would do so because the sages of ancient India were extremely careful to distinguish between life, a spiritual phenomenon, and longevity, a term that refers to the proper maintenance of the material body. Here, too, resonance with Hare Krishna philosophy is immediately apparent: the distinction between body and self is fundamental to Vaishnava thought.

Though death and disease afflict us all, encased as we are in material bodies, we nonetheless search for practical and effective methods of bodily maintenance. Like everyone else, people on the spiritual path look for this as well. The difference is that aspiring spiritual seekers want to maintain and care for their bodies in ways that do not compromise or infringe on their spiritual practices. Ayurveda seeks to accomplish this end, thus making it more than an ordinary medical science. It elucidates not only the healthiest interaction of body and mind, but it also prescribes guidelines for realizing the relationship between these two and the eternal spirit within each of us. It is thus totally holistic.

The science of Ayurveda was revealed about fifty centuries ago as part of the Vedic literature. More significantly, later texts developed Ayurvedic themes to a degree that far surpasses the rudimentary analysis of it in the Vedas. In fact, modern practitioners of the science are more apt to use the Medieval encyclopedias of Ayurveda, such as those compiled by Charaka and Shushruta, than to refer to the Vedic texts themselves. Still, these works are based on knowledge found in the Vedas, even if they include such subjects as pediatrics, obstetrics, gynecology, internal medicine, otolaryngology and plastic surgery. Modern scientists are still in awe at the depth and clarity of Ayurvedic information; it is a mystery that such a complex system was conceived so long ago.

To understand Ayurveda, one must grasp the Tridosha theory of ancient India. The doshas are subtle forces within the body and mind whose interactions make us who we are as distinct individuals. The doshas are called Vata, Pitta, and Kapha — Sanskrit words that refer, respectively, to activity and motion, heat and energy, and structure and density. On the grossest platform, Vata, Pitta, and Kapha also refer to air, bile, and mucus. These three interact with the seven dhatus, or tissues — those derived from digested food, blood, muscle, fat, bone, bone marrow, and reproductive tissue.

Through daily activity, diet, and environment, the doshas and dhatus, forces that interact on the most subtle levels, are constantly moved in and out of alignment, and this is what causes disease. Ayurveda deals with these things as a minute science, prescribing different foods, medicines (herbs),

and activity according to each person's needs. Its methods are mainly preventive, rather than waiting for disease to begin and attempting to cure it when it may already be too late. But the system also includes effective approaches to rejuvenation and the healing of contracted diseases.

Ayurveda and Rasa

According to Ayurveda, there are six types of tastes, or rasas, and each taste has a different effect on digestion. A rasa can be light or heavy, moist or dry. Light tastes are easier to digest, but the heavy ones require more energy for the body to assimilate. Now, the six tastes run as follows: bitter, sour, salty, pungent, astringent, and sweet. According to Ayurveda, it is advisable to include foods in one's diet that contain all six rasas because, properly combined, these six create dietary balance. Excessive consumption of any of these could result in adverse effects.

Interestingly, in Krishna Consciousness, our conception of God includes a similar phenomenon. We say that God is a person, Krishna, and that He relishes not just one or two but all different kinds of relationships. Basically, there are five categories of relationship that one may have with the Lord: one can relate to Him in a neutral mood, as a servant, as a friend, or in a nurturing capacity, as a parent, or as a lover. The sweetest of these relationships, however, is known as madhurya (which actually means "sweet") — this is the relationship of conjugal love. Just as sweetness is one of the rasas, or tastes, in Ayurveda, it is also one of the rasas, or relationships, one may have with Krishna. The same word — rasa — is used in these two different ways. And just as all rasas play their role in Ayurveda, so, too, does Krishna want more than just the relationship of conjugal love, madhurya — He wants diverse kinds of relationships, as we want diverse kinds of relationships with Him.

Originally, the term rasa meant "sap," "juice," or "essence," and by extension "flavor," "enjoyment," and "taste," as in Ayurvedic texts. It was used in the early Upanishads to mean "essence," and here it was associated with the highest reality. The Taittiriya Upanishad, for example, claims, "Verily he (the soul) is rasa. And he becomes joyful only after obtaining rasa." The implications at this point, though, are still vague. There are schools of Indian thought that confuse the Supreme Soul, God, with the individual soul, you and I.

Next, the word rasa was used in aesthetics and dramaturgy, like in the Natya Shastra of the legendary sage Bharata. Within this context, the term rasa is best translated as "dramatic sentiment," or "aesthetic enjoyment." Bharata and others, such as Abhinavagupta, developed this rasa idea into a science, reasoning that if one can experience various emotions by living and participating in day-to-day life, these same sentiments could be recreated by dramatic performance, evoking the same moods and emotions as they do in real life.

In the Sixteenth century, Rupa Goswami, one of the early theologians of the Hare Krishna tradition, took this rasa theory further still, using the already existing concepts and terminology of rasa to articulate love for Krishna. He learned the dynamics of this system from Lord Chaitanya Himself, who was none other than Radha and Krishna in one, combined form. Chaitanya, in fact, was the ultimate Deity descended from the spiritual world to explain the path of self-realization that is most effective in our current age of quarrel and hypocrisy. Rupa Goswami learned the essence of the rasa idea from Him, and then he used the terminology of the earlier dramatic theorists and aestheticians to articulate it to the people of his day. In other words, he spiritualized an already existing conception of interpersonal exchange, taking the terminology of dramatic performance and applying it to the ultimate drama: one's relationship with God. Sri Rupa explained that the only real drama, or the only drama worth pursuing, is our interaction with Krishna, and, to this end, he elaborated on already existing rasa terminology, adapting it or embellishing it when he deemed necessary.

Although Sri Rupa discusses various types of spiritual rasa, it is important to understand that, for him, true rasa must be rooted in love for Krishna (krishna-rati). Acknowledging the different kinds of devotees and the multiplicity of relationships one may have with God, he devised a brilliant methodology for articulating these different kinds of love. Though love is one, he writes, it is experienced as many because of the different types of people who experience it. Accordingly, Rupa divides rasas into "primary" and "secondary." There are five primary ones, and each is understood to be a direct form of rati, or "love" for Krishna. The secondary ones are seven in number, and they correspond to the classical rasas of dramatic theory.

The five forms of primary rasa — the rasas of being neutral, servile, friendly, parental, and conjugal — are presented in terms of a hierarchy, with the last, the conjugal rasa, clearly being the most desirable. The criterion of hierarchical judgment here is the intensity of emotion, and the fact

that each higher rasa contains certain elements of the ones that come before it. Ultimately, however, all rasas are equal, or absolute, in the sense that they are all spiritual. Krishna relishes them all, just as the body relishes all six tastes in Ayurvedic medicine.

Rupa Goswami explains the rasas at length in his book, the Bhakti-rasamrta-sindhu, and Srila Prabhupada has summarized these teachings in his own book, The Nectar of Devotion. To begin, the neutral or peaceful (shanta) devotees are those who have achieved tranquility in their service to God, which manifests out of their love for Krishna. Rupa describes their emotional experience (bhava) as being similar to the joy of the yogis, except that the yogis seek to realize the self (atman), whereas the object of those in santa-rasa is the Lord (Bhagavan). Taking cautious steps up the hierarchical ladder, the next type of devotional rasa is that of being a servant (prita-bhakti-rasa), which, Rupa writes, is based on a type of love that is colored by profound respect. In this rasa, Krishna is in the mood of a superior, or perhaps a protective elder, and the devotees who partake of this rasa relate to Him as servants or younger relatives. Since this type of relationship is limited by deference for the Lord, with an awareness of His power and lordship, it bows down to the following types of love, which are more intimate.

Next comes a type of transcendental friendship or companionship (preyo-bhakti-rasa, also known as sakhya-rasa), whose overarching characteristic is a sense of equality. In this relationship, Krishna manifests as the devotee's friend. The devotees who experience this rasa are completely unrestrained in their interaction with the Lord, enjoying an intimate familiarity with Him. Here we see a more or less equal status between Krishna and His devotee — by Krishna's will, of course. Certainly, if He did not allow it, it could not be. But His trust for such devotees is so complete, that He grants them a position equal to His own.

After this, Sri Rupa describes the devotee who relishes parental affection (vatsala-bhakti-rasa). For such persons, Krishna appears as a child in need of nurturing and concern. The devotee in this rasa is an elder who feels the need to protect young Krishna, caring for Him with the intensity of a loving guardian. Since Krishna is here the recipient of kindness and protection, his majestic power is concealed, leading to greater intimacy. Krishna's parents in the spiritual world, Devaki and Vasudeva, and also Yashoda and Nanda, are considered the highest prototypes for this kind of devotee. Vatsalya-rasa, Rupa tells us, has a feature that separates it from the prior three: it expects nothing in return, and it is not compromised when not reciprocated. Rupa thus recognizes a certain selflessness in this kind of love. In fact, he says, the total and unremitting sense of giving in this kind of love is hinted at in the material world — a truly loving parent, even here, asks for nothing in return.

The supreme devotional rasa, leading to the highest type of religious experience, is conjugal love (madhura-bhakti-rasa), which is based on the mood of amorous affection. So important is this sentiment, and so intricate is this aspect of devotional science, that Rupa saw fit to author an entirely separate volume, the Ujjvala-nilamani, focusing on this highest rasa. Here, Krishna is the supreme lover, a relationship with God merely hinted at in Christian mysticism and in other great traditions of the world. Rupa explains it as the acme of spiritual perfection, without a tinge of lust, its mundane counterpart. He describes the gopis of Vraja, Krishna's cowherd girlfriends, as the most exalted of all devotees, for they fully embody this madhurya-rasa. Sri Radha, daughter of Vrishabhanu, is described as the most successful of the gopis, as Her very name suggests. It means "She who pleases Krishna best." Indeed, She is His very Self, so intimate is their love. The distinctive feature of this madhurya-rasa is that it is not diminished by any circumstances — it is totally selfless, even more so than the nearly perfect love that a parent has for her needy dependents. It is clear from Rupa's work that this rasa encompasses the strengths of all the other forms of love, making it the rasa par excellence.

In conclusion, Rupa Goswami, following Sri Chaitanya and the time-honored Vedic tradition that came before him, gave the world a theological system that accommodates all possible relationships with God. I say this in full awareness that a complete life of interpersonal exchange would include more than the five basic rasas mentioned above: within the secondary relationships mentioned earlier, for example, there is even chivalry, as well as ghastly modes of interaction, indicating that Krishna, at times, likes competition and rivalry. The inner life of God, let it be said, is complete and wants for nothing.

It must be reiterated here that devotees of Krishna are more concerned with the soul than with the body, and while embracing Ayurvedic principles for bodily care, they look to the Bhagavad Gita and the Srimad Bhagavatam — and to the teachings of Rupa Goswami — for spiritual advancement and guidance in life. But if I have conveyed here a few ideas about Vaishnava thought and its value in

spiritual well-being, I will have hopefully added something to your understanding of Ayurveda in its original, spiritual context.

The New Carnivores

At first I thought it was my imagination: walking the streets of New York City, I heard more than a few people talking about newfound flesh delicacies, from brains to brisket. "Maybe it's a coincidence," I thought. "Perhaps I just happened to hear the ramblings of some highly experimental meat-eaters." Looking in several restaurant windows, spying their fancy menus, I saw other suspicious looking food items: clod, flatiron, tongue, shank, bone marrow, and even heart, parts of a cow I would rather see only where nature intended them, if at all, instead of on my plate. And this was pervasive, not just in one or two establishments.

Of course, I had heard about the strange food choices of carnivores around the world for years, such as the demand for sauteed iguana meat in Central and South America; fried grasshoppers in Africa; lamb and calf brains in Middle Eastern countries; chicken heads, live shrimp, and dog meat in Korea and China; and chocolate-dipped ants in Japan, to name a few. But here in my home town?

Recent articles in The New York Times and The Post brought the point home for me: "We're having a meat wave" was the catchy title of one report. "It adds up to the offal truth," read another. Apparently, according to reporter Carla Spartos, "macho meat eaters are entrail-oriented," and they seem to thrive on previously untasted body parts — with no organ left uneaten. She writes about Scott Gold's new book, The Shameless Carnivore, among others, where we learn that high-class food connoisseurs are now demanding things like duck hearts, pork cheeks, and other horrifying treats.[27]

Clearly, this is an instance of Kali-yuga run amok. The age is progressing (or regressing) at a rapid rate. The simple meat-and-potatoes carnivorous diet of yesteryear is now being replaced by unseemly body cuisine that would make Lucifer cringe. Let us be clear, though: it is not that eating brains or guts or other unusual body parts is somehow worse than eating epidermis; however, it offends our sensibilities more. We are not used to it, and it signals a moving forward of the age of degradation and horror: Vaishnava texts tell us that at the end of Kali-yuga, many thousands of years from now, humankind will reach the point of raising children simply to eat their flesh.

Even now, numerous physicians and medical experts are calling this new trend "devastating" and "a portent of evil things to come." Neal Bernard, M.D., Michael Klaper, M.D., John A. McDougall, M.D., and many others are speaking out, trying to stop this experimental meat-eating before it is too late. Their arguments are not only health-oriented, as one might expect, but also draw on the language of decency. It is simply not right, they say, and a reaction awaits all who indulge.

Yoga texts have been saying these things for years. Just as the Bible teaches the Golden Rule — "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you" — the Mahabharata (5.39.57), predating the Bible, teaches a similar truth, and in almost the exact same wording. Yogis and spiritual adepts in India extend the teaching to its logical limits, showing kindness to all species of life — and this, of course, means vegetarianism. It is hard to be kind to animals if you are eating them. In other words, if you don't want someone eating your entrails, don't eat the entrails of others.

The "do unto others" ethic is reflected in the origins of the Sanskrit word for meat, mamsa, which means "me-he" — or, by implication, "The fate of this animal will also be mine." This etymological derivation of the word can be traced to the Manu-samhita (5.55): "He will eat me in the next world, whose meat (mamsa) I eat in this world. This is why meat is called mam-sa, or 'me-he'." The Golden Rule is clearly at work here. If what I "do unto you" is to eat you, then you have every right, in some future life, to "do the same unto me" — to eat me. In other words, the karmic reaction for eating a living being is evident in the language itself — "I will be eaten in the same way that I eat others, even if they are animals."

Thus, true yogis oppose killing for many reasons. They know that every action holds within it an avoidable reaction (karma), and that the idea of reincarnation — of taking one's next birth in a form commensurate with our deeds — follows karma like the butcher does his meat. Thus, that which we do to others will be done to us. This is the universal law of cause and effect, echoing, once again, the Golden Rule. In other words, killing begets killing, and since there are many lives in which to reap what one sows, violence and killing eventually return to those who are violent and to those who kill, if not in this life, then in the next one.

Ahimsa is often said to mean "non-violence," but, more specifically, it refers to "non-aggression," and it is a high priority in the practice of yoga and Eastern spirituality. The distinction between non-violence and non-aggression should be clear. Violence is sometimes necessary, as, for example,

when a loved one is attacked and protection is required, or when one's life is threatened and self-defense becomes natural or obligatory. In such cases, violence may be in order. But aggression never is, at least when it comes to harming others.

Qualities such as gentleness, humility, and compassion, and all related characteristics, are necessary components of ahimsa, without which one is not really practicing spiritual life proper, and so devotees put a premium on such behavior. In all yogic traditions, we see cows as symbolic of all finer qualities, and as representing the animal kingdom as a whole. For this reason, dedicated yogis particularly venerate cows as an emblem of ahimsa. The yogic position is clear: as she is dear to Lord Krishna, the divine cowherd, so should she be dear to us all.

In India, to this day, cows are appreciated for their practical value as well, with the five health-giving products that come from their bodies — urine, cow dung, milk, ghee (butter), and yogurt — used in numerous ways. Amazingly, these items, especially urine and dung, have been found to be effective (and cost efficient) as fertilizer, compost, medicines, pest repellents, cleansing products, and biogas fuel. The cow is also considered sacred as a natural mother for human society — as one's biological mother weans her young on breast milk, so does the cow nurture us in the same way. Caring for mother cow is thus seen as an important component of ahimsa. For this reason, cows should not be eaten at all, what to speak of the gory insides and obscure offal that are now part of the New Carnivores' repertoire.

It should be noted, however, that while ahimsa is considered important in yoga practice, it always remains subservient to love for God, or union with the Supreme, which is the core of the tradition. The Vaishnava scriptures do not limit their discussion of food to the avoidance of killing and the virtues of a vegetarian diet. According to traditional texts, one should offer all food as a sacrifice to God: "All that you do, all that you eat, all that you offer and give away, as well as all austerities that you may perform," Lord Krishna says, "should be done as an offering unto Me." (Bhagavad Gita 9.27) Krishna does not eat meat, and He would look aghast at the new menus in New York.

The Gita specifies exactly what should be offered: "If one offers Me with love and devotion a leaf, a flower, a fruit, or water, I will accept it." (9.26) Other references in the Vaishnava literature confirm that fruits, vegetables, grain, nuts, and dairy products are fit for human consumption. Followers of the Gita thus refrain from meat, fish, poultry, and eggs, since these are not sanctioned by either the scriptures or the sages. A vegan diet also fits nicely with Vaishnava dietary prerequisites.

The Bhagavad Gita further declares that one who lovingly offers food to God according to scriptural guidelines is freed from all sinful reactions and consequent rebirth in the material world: "The devotees of the Lord are released from all kinds of sins because they eat food which is first offered in sacrifice. Others, who prepare food for personal sense enjoyment, verily eat only sin." (3.13) The remnants of such devotional offerings are called prasadam (literally "the Lord's mercy").

Sin is a heavy word, and it comes with a lot of baggage. But who wouldn't think of sin when confronted with the new wave of meat-eating emerging in the Big Apple? It's all part of a trend toward decadent forms of pleasure, squarely centered on meat eating. Josh Ozersky, editor of the blog Grub Street and author of Meat Me in Manhattan, documents the entire phenomenon in his book, The Hamburger: A History, which seems much loved by reviewers.

Lord Krishna's review, I would wager, is a bit more nuanced. Yogic texts have warned us about sense pleasure left uncontrolled, and medical journals are full of statistics about the virtues of a non-meat diet. If we are not meant to eat meat, it is reasonable that meat-eating will wreak havoc on our bodies. And it does.

In conclusion, just as yogis generally promote vegetarianism within the context of prasadam, they also acknowledge the benefits of a vegetarian diet as a stepping-stone to spiritual perfection. In the Bhagavad Gita, Chapter Seventeen, Lord Krishna Himself acknowledges that food can be divided into three categories: goodness, passion, and ignorance. Clearly, the effects of eating food in passion and ignorance, which includes the eating of meat, has adverse affects on the human condition. Conversely, say these same yogic texts, eating food in goodness — fruits, nuts, vegetables, whole grains, milk, and so on — sets the stage for transcendence, wherein one has the opportunity to become more appreciative of spirituality in general.

True, until a devoted soul comes along and offers the food to Krishna, or God in any of His or Her manifestations, making it prasadam, one is likely to have a set stage with no actors and no performance. That is, vegetarianism may position us for higher material aspirations and predispose us to God consciousness, but without the touch of God, through the agency of His devotees, we are not likely to get all that can be had from a vegetarian diet. Why not, suggests the Bhagavad Gita, get the

most out of our vegetarianism by offering our food to God?

The official fetish animal of the modern carnivore movement, says Ozersky, is the pig. I think Krishna would find a certain poetic justice in that, since pigs will eat just about anything. But more, those who enjoy at an animal's expense will likely end up on their best friend's plate, if they just wait a few years.

The Yoga of Eating

Integral Yoga Magazine **(IYM): Many yogis don't seem to understand the link between diet and sadhana (spiritual practice).**
Steven J. Rosen (SR): That's very true, and an important aspect of why I wrote the book. This is my third book on vegetarianism. I've written about how the world religions view vegetarianism; that book was called Diet for Transcendence: Vegetarianism and the World Religions (Torchlight, 1998). I did another one called Holy Cow: The Hare Krishna Contribution to Vegetarianism and Animal Rights (Lantern, 2004), which explains vegetarianism in the Hindu tradition, and now this one, which focuses on the impact of a vegetarian diet on one's yoga practice. In many ways, this one is most important, because it shows, beyond doubt, that a vegetarian diet is helpful for the practicing yogi.

There's a great quote that Sharon Gannon sent me about the book. She wrote, "The prolific author Steven J. Rosen has a new book out, titled Food for the Soul: Vegetarianism and the Yoga Traditions (Praeger, 2011), a collection of essays by scholars of yoga as well as practitioners, all of whom provide convincing evidence that a plant-based diet is the best diet for one who seeks spiritual evolution and/or a more happy and healthy life." So that's quite good for promotion, given who she is and her integrity and renown as a prominent yogini.

In fact, her book, Yoga and Vegetarianism (Mandala, 2008), inspired this book. I read her work and liked it so much that I felt it might be beneficial to augment what she started there — to develop the seed that she planted. So, in my book, I present the views of experts from the various Yoga traditions, but I also present the voices of scholars. In this way, the subject is dealt with in a comprehensive manner.

IYM: And so how would you articulate the overall theme of your book?
SR: It shows that if you are practicing any kind of yoga, you really need to be a vegetarian. It's clear from Patanjali that harmlessness, or non-violence, or non-aggression — ahimsa — is central to yoga practice, and that it's not just about the interaction between human beings, but also about our interaction with animals. To prove this, I include in this volume essays that I personally wrote about yoga and vegetarianism, and also others I gathered together by some of the most prominent voices in the yoga movement — that is, by practitioners of various well-known yoga traditions, including Integral Yoga, Transcendental Meditation, Jivamukti, Iyengar, and others –and each one makes it clear that a practitioner must eventually give up a meat-centered diet if they want to progress on the yogic path.

IYM: Why? In other words, how would you explain, succinctly, the rationale behind why a yogi or a yogini must be a vegetarian?
SR: There are two main goals in yoga: controlling the fluctuations of the mind — the central focus of Patanjali's Yoga Sutras — and union with the divine, which is what the word yoga literally means. Now, let's look at these two goals a little more closely. To begin, how do we control the mind's fluctuations?

We do this by cultivating sattva-guna, the mode of goodness, the mode of illumination. People know this intuitively, but it is also taught in India's ancient Vedic texts, and in the teachings of yoga's greatest masters. There are certain activities in life that help us to develop our goodness, to be illumined, to shine with wakefulness, with consciousness. We know this. There are things that enhance our spirituality, and there are things that bring us into deeper darkness.

One of these is eating, which can take us either way. In the Bhagavad Gita, Sri Krishna explains food as being in the various modes of nature, bringing us up or down, depending on what we eat and how we eat. Eating, in fact, is among the most important aspects of life, affecting our spiritual progress in no uncertain ways. What we eat affects our consciousness. If we go to the grocery store, to purchase and consume flesh of a dead animal — and much has been written about the pain, fear and anxiety in the heart of the slaughtered animal, and how it remains there, and how it carries on into the body of the eater — it affects our way of thinking. On subtle and not-so-subtle levels, it infects our consciousness.

If our consciousness is negatively impacted by our food choices, then the food we are consuming doesn't support our practice of yoga. Correct? We can't control the fluctuations of the mind if the mind is taken over with rajas (passion) and tamas (ignorance). This is precisely what meat and

certain other foods do. They negatively impact the consciousness, making it more difficult to make spiritual progress.

IYM: What about the second aspect? You initially mentioned two.
SR: The second aspect of yoga is the more central one: yoga means to unite with the Supreme. Linking up with the divine is central to yoga. It's the same as religion, which means to "bind back." The whole idea, whether we're talking about yoga or religion, is to unite with God, to bind ourselves with the Divine. People use these techniques and methods for various things, but this was the original intention.

Now, how can we link with the Divine if we're not willing to share love with His or Her creatures? Whatever our conception of the Supreme — the Supreme, however we define it, is the source of all. Animals come from God, too. How can we pray for mercy, to cite but one example, if we're not willing to extend mercy to others? It is inconsistent! Isaac Bashevis Singer wrote that in a Foreword to one of my books (Food for the Spirit: Vegetarianism and World Religions, which is an earlier version of Diet for Transcendence). He said that to link to the divine, you have to have compassion. This takes us back to ahimsa, the first principle that Patanjali gives in the Yoga Sutras. Singer wrote, "How can we ask God for compassion when we aren't willing to show it to others?" It's a simple question, but, if you think about it, it is brimming over with meaning.

Linking with the Divine thus necessitates a change in diet. We have to be thoughtful, contemplative. Let us realize the source of our food. Is it supplied naturally, intended for our sustenance, or is it taken by harsh means, forcefully, in a selfish way? I think anyone who studies the facts about meat production will find easy enough answers.

IYM: Some say that they need **to consume meat for a variety of reasons, including medical needs, while others argue that they are able to bless and transmute the food into spiritual energy.**
SR: A lot of our dietary choices seem to be based on cultural conditioning. You'd be surprised how few people need meat. And to them I say: if someone absolutely needs meat, then let them eat it. But they should remember that killing is still killing. As yogis, we want to do the least amount of harm to sentient beings. I say we eat meat too easily. If you live in Alaska and you have to eat meat because nothing else is available, well, that's an exceptional and pardonable situation. That's different. But, even then, you are still not cultivating sattva-guna, and so it's more difficult to elevate yourself to an illumined state. It's unfortunate. If you need to eat meat, you can do so, but don't fool yourself then about yogic progress. It will be much more difficult for you. Meat is still meat.

Some people claim to have a medical condition, or the type of blood that requires them to eat meat. But how many really go through the effort of researching it thoroughly, to see if eating meat is necessary for them, or if there might not be a way around it? Perhaps other food combinations could give them what they need, nutritionally. Why not? Why would God put them in a position where they have to eat meat? Maybe they're accepting the verdict too easily.

Again, if someone absolutely needs to eat meat, then they should, but they should know it will be more difficult to control the fluctuations of the mind, to develop sattva-guna, the mode of goodness. But that may be their karma.

IYM: And what about those who claim that they can spiritualize the meat through mantra or prayer?
SR: If there are those who really believe they can transmute the meat into a spiritual meal, God bless them. [laughter] We see in Biblical times the whole idea of koshering, which is ostensibly a "spiritual way of eating meat." But the whole idea is to drain out the blood from the animal's every cell, and it just can't be done. So no food is really kosher, at least not in the strictest sense. And some Jewish mystics taught that if practicing Jews eat meat, then the animal so sacrificed for their tongues will ultimately go to a better place. Sounds like a rationale to me. There was also allowance for that in ancient Vedic culture. Brahmin priests ordained certain animal sacrifices, but it was understood as a concession, as not being the best for yogic perfection. Even the Manu-samhita (5.56) says, "There is no fault in eating meat, in (drinking) spirituous liquor, and in carnal intercourse, for that is the natural way of created beings, but abstention brings greater rewards." In other words, people may naturally do these things, especially as Kali-yuga, the age of quarrel and hypocrisy, progresses, but it is better to abstain.

People who give "spiritual" arguments for eating meat often do so as a way of rationalizing their taste for animal flesh. It's not for me to judge, but I'd say it's rare — or medium rare [laughter] — that someone needs to eat meat for medical or nutritional reasons. We have to be honest with ourselves. We need to be sincere in our practice, our sadhana. We have to know what our real motivation is. And if they indeed do need to eat animals, it will be difficult for them to cultivate the finer aspects of sadhana needed to reach the state of yoga.

IYM: Obviously, this is playing devil's advocate, but haven't there been many sages and saints who weren't vegetarians?
SR: If we read the texts from masters in the past, the majority of yogis prescribe a vegetarian diet. There will always be exceptions, but we're talking about what they instructed for the majority. Along these lines, I was happy to get Rick Jarrow's contribution to the book. In his chapter, he explored the dissenting voices in a diverse tradition, uncovering aspects of yogic teaching that run counter to the vegetarian ideal. He mentions certain yogis who argued against vegetarianism, Buddhists and so on. His contribution makes for a more well-rounded discussion. But even he came to the conclusion that those who were able to attain the highest states of consciousness without being vegetarian were exceptions to the rule. There were usually clear reasons for them to eat meat. For example, Tibetan Buddhists: it was largely because of geographical considerations: the mountainous land of Tibet, where this tradition is commonly practiced, does not lend itself to crop cultivation. You see? So meat eating evolved in those traditions because alternatives were not easily available.

IYM: But yoga is about being flexible, isn't it?
SR: Yes, surely, but there are things that help with our practice and things that do not. In Kino MacGregor's chapter, for example, she explains that yoga is flexible — to a point. When a student first comes to yoga, it's important that the teacher be open and willing to adjust the rules and regulations in order for the student to make progress. In the beginning stages, even Mr. Iyengar says that one may eat meat, but he also says that eventually you have to give up certain things, including a non-vegetarian diet — at least if you really want to progress. Professor Edwin Bryant's contribution to the book was extremely important in this regard. He explores the history of ahimsa and how it plays out in the Yoga Sutras. He says that, according to Patanjali, if you want to practice Yoga seriously, you have to be vegetarian. "It's non-negotiable." That's what Bryant says — and he's studied the yoga texts more thoroughly than most people.

You see, when the student becomes serious about the main goal — the spiritual goal — of Yoga, it requires certain observances, practices and disciplines. These lie at the heart of one's sadhana practice — just like the five yamas and five niyamas that are foundational to any genuine yoga practice. These foundational teachings all begin with ahimsa. There's just no escaping it.

IYM: Does your book address how we can make eating a part of our sadhana?
SR: There are several chapters on the importance of eating as a sadhana practice, and in these chapters we talk about prasad, that is, blessed or consecrated food. We talk about the different yoga systems that Sri Krishna recommends in the Bhagavad Gita, one of the main texts on yoga, and how offering one's food to the Divine contributes to developing a higher consciousness. What Sri Krishna calls the highest form of yoga, bhakti-yoga, includes a practice in which we offer mantras over the food, thus offering it to the Divine. We spiritualize the food we eat by chanting certain mantras, offering it, and it then becomes prasadam, a blessed meal, sustaining us in our physical bodies so we can go on with our practice. This makes it an essential part of our sadhana.

We know that every seven years, all the cells in the body change. Think about that. In other words, by consuming spiritual food — food consecrated as an offering to the Divine — our body becomes completely spiritualized within seven years. Prasadam — which is always vegetarian — will make us completely spiritual if we learn the art and practice of doing it properly.

In the Gita, Sri Krishna says that a yogi is one who doesn't eat too much or too little. Yogis need to be balanced and sattvic. The great sage Vishvanath Chakravarti comments on Bhagavad Gita 6.16: "One should fill the stomach half with food, one quarter with water, and one quarter remaining for the movement of air." And one should eat at regulated times. This is yoga. Then, when we learn how to transform food into prasadam, it becomes the perfection of yoga. In this way, eating can be a totally spiritual experience. All food ultimately come from the Supreme, and the gesture of offering it back really represents the quality of gratefulness which is at the heart of yoga — being grateful for nature

and all that surrounds us.

“Does *Asana* Really Equal Yoga?!”: A Vaishnava Perspective

In the Western world, yoga[28] is more popular than ever before. “It’s at the top of its game,” says Dan Gurlitz, general manager of Koch Vision, whose distribution of Yoga Zone DVDs and videos is a “serious seven-figure business.” Yoga Journal estimates that 20 million American residents practiced yoga last year, an increase of almost 30% from the year before. Other Western countries follow close behind.

The funny thing is, if you ask the average yoga practitioner in the West what yoga is all about, you will probably hear answers like, “It makes me feel good,” “It’s stimulating,” “It’s relaxing,” “Done properly, it’s quite a work-out,” or “It keeps me in shape.”

Nearly every response presupposes reference to the physical dimensions of yoga practice. One would think it is merely another exercise regimen, or at best a method of keeping body, mind, and soul in some sort of integrated harmony.

The fact is, this body-centered focus is something new. Traditionally, yoga is a spiritual discipline, with even Patanjali, famous for his Yoga Sutras, de-emphasizing the asana (“postures”) and pranayama (“breathing exercises”) part of the practice, so popular for today’s yogis.

His Yoga Sutras is an ancient Indian text where yoga is more defined in a spiritual sense, not merely as the physical exercises popular today as hatha-yoga. Indeed, they are described as essential techniques for stilling the mind and achieving spiritual illumination.

In the second sutra of Patanjali’s work, we see yoga defined as yogash chitta vritti nirodhah, which roughly translates as “yoga is the control (nirodhah) of the thought patterns of the mind.” In other words, yoga is the doorway by which we can go beyond mundane mental processes, a method for controlling the discomforting fluctuations of the mind. In fact, the entire practice was meant to gain mastery of the body and mind. But for what purpose? In the end, the great yogis of old wanted mastery of body and mind to pursue the spirit. That was the real motivation of yoga.

Swami Satchidananda, renowned in the yoga world as a master, makes the spiritual dimension of yoga clear in his commentary on Patanjali’s sutras:

> When the word yoga is mentioned, most people immediately think of some physical practices for stretching and stress reduction. This is one aspect of the yogic science, but actually only a very small part and relatively recent in development. The physical yoga, or hatha-yoga, was primarily designed to facilitate the real practice of yoga — namely, the understanding and complete mastery over the mind… This is how one reaches the spirit.[29]

Ultimately, the word yoga means “union,” and its implications went far beyond the mere union of body, mind and spirit, the sort of healthful integration sought by many modern practitioners of yoga. It is not that the body was frowned upon; it was seen as an essential instrument for serving the Divine. Hence, the mandate to fine-tune it and to use it as a precious tool for transcendence.

Originally, though, yoga referred to union with God. And not in some tepid, abstract sense: “I am one with God.” It meant developing a service attitude — it meant becoming one with God in purpose, not as an ontological entity, culminating in bhakti-yoga, or the yoga of devotion. Indeed, Lord Krishna says in the Bhagavad Gita (6.47): “And of all yogis, he who always abides in Me with great faith, worshipping Me in transcendental loving service, is most intimately united with Me in yoga and is the highest of all.”

In this way, a clear picture emerges about the methods and goals of yogic practice: one begins by controlling the body and mind, making it a finely tuned instrument. But this is just a beginning step. After that, one uses this instrument in the Lord’s service. This is the perfection of Yoga, technically called bhakti-yoga.

In the end, then, if one uses a poorly tuned instrument, such as a body that is not privy to the benefits of hatha-yoga, in such divine service, this is better than a perfectly tuned instrument (a yogi’s body) that is used for other things.

This is one of the great banes of modern yoga practice. By developing a superior bodily vehicle, one is likely to fall from the spiritual path, becoming enamored by the physical assets of regular discipline, which are many. Patanjali warns his readers to eschew such yogic perfections and other, more metaphysical perfections, too, for these can be a distraction on the spiritual path.

Indeed, yoga tends to elevate its practitioners to a state of sattva-guna (“the mode of goodness”), which can be advantageous — but it can also be deleterious. The advantage is obvious: enhanced

consciousness, inclination to pious activity, and a suitable environment for further advancement on the path. But it can also hinder practitioners, because sattva-guna can cause attachment to one's yogic view and lifestyle. One feels they already have knowledge, and thus experience a reluctance to progress further. They become attached to their comfortable conceptions of spirituality and have difficulty moving forward. If one deems themselves happy, they have a difficult time believing they could be "more happy."

But higher realms do exist. The happiness that is derived from ordinary yoga practice is described in ancient yoga texts as being like the drops of water in a calf's footprint, when compared to the ocean of bliss found in the practice of bhakti-yoga. That is to say, whether one practices hatha-yoga or not, one would do well to gradually move into the realm of bhakti, rendering spiritual service and developing a selfless attitude under the direction of a bona fide spiritual preceptor — all with a mood of devotional love.

One may ask, "what does bhakti-yoga look like? How can one engage in its practices in a simple and direct way, even while engaged in ordinary yoga?" A simple answer is as follows: learn how to chant the holy name (mantra meditation) under the direction of one who knows and who has received the name from a master whose lineage is respected as one that bestows sacred sound vibrations. Then the seed of bhakti comes down in full form.

Kirtan — call and response chanting — is all the rage now in yoga studios throughout the world, but one must learn to chant properly, and then it will have full potency and offer the true fruits of bhakti-yoga.

When one chants properly, under the guidance of one who knows, one then becomes privy to the prescribed means of self-realization in the current age. As the yogic texts say, "The goal of self-realization — which was achieved in the Satya age by meditation and raja-yoga, in the Treta age by the performance of numerous elaborate sacrifices, and in the Dvapara age by worship of Lord Krishna (as the Deity in the temple) — can be achieved in the age of Kali simply by chanting the holy names of Krishna." (Bhagavata Purana.12.3.52)

This chanting is the essence of bhakti-yoga, which is the essence of yoga in general. Thus, chanting is the essence of the essence. This is so because, in the chanting process, one learns to give one's heart to the Deity, to the Soul of all souls. One learns how to truly unite with the Divine. In the end, Patanjali, too, recommends ishvara pranidhana, or giving one's life to God with a mood of full devotion. Although most yogis today don't know it, this is what Yoga is really all about.

Hatha-yoga **and the** Bhagavad Gita

According to a 2003 survey by the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association, an estimated 13.4 million Americans practice yoga, and many more experiment with it every year. Yoga is everywhere, from Mumbai to Moscow to Monte Carlo. But while yoga is meant to bring one closer to God, many of today's yogis have a different agenda, the most common being to keep their bodies in shape.

"They're not necessarily deeply spiritual, but looking more to do yoga as another form of exercise," says Jennifer McKinley, co-founder and general manager of Plank, a Charlestown, Massachusetts, maker of chic, high-end yoga mats, totes, and other accessories. Launched in 2005, the company projects sales in the upcoming year that will rival that of Western exercise equipment.

In an increasingly secular world, we naturally want to adapt valuable ancient techniques for contemporary purposes, but yoga is losing its essence in the process.

Yoga is a science left to us by the sages of India. It is a process for controlling the fluctuations of the mind (chitta-vritti-nirodhah), as Patanjali puts it in the second verse of his sutras. The word yoga literally means "to link up," and its implication, originally, was similar to the Latin root of the word religion, which means "to bind back." Thus, yoga and religion are both meant to bring us to the same end: linking up and binding with God.

The Inner Message of the Yoga Sutras

Today's yogis might find it interesting that, traditionally, the preeminent text on yoga is the Bhagavad Gita, not Patanjali's famous Yoga Sutras. But the Gita is not your usual yoga text, full of difficult bodily poses and strenuous meditation techniques. Rather, it offers a practical outline for achieving the goal of yoga — linking with God — by encouraging the chanting of Krishna's names, by teaching how to act under Krishna's order, and by explaining the importance of doing one's duty in spiritual consciousness. These activities, properly performed under the guidance of an adept, allow one to bypass much of what is considered essential in conventional yoga.

And yet there is harmony between the Gita and the Yoga Sutras. For example, both Lord Krishna and Patanjali indicate that we must transcend all false conceptions of "I" and develop love for God, which Patanjali calls ishvara-pranidhana ("dedication to God").

Patanjali wrote in the third century CE, but little is known about his life. His only surviving text, the Yoga Sutras, would indicate that toned physical and mental tabernacles are helpful in the pursuit of spiritual truth. In fact, his major accomplishment is that he took age-old practices meant for improving the body and the mind and codified them for the benefit of spiritual practitioners.

But Patanjali's Yoga Sutras merely hint at the truths illuminated in the Bhagavad Gita, which might be considered the post-graduate study of Patanjali's work. Even so, Patanjali intended his method to be used for ultimate spiritual benefit, as some of his verses, especially later ones, clarify. Still, many yoga practitioners today use his method solely for physical and mental health, because in the beginning of his work, Patanjali mainly focuses on basic methods related to the body and the mind, without much spiritual commentary.

In sutra 3.2, for example, we learn that dhyana, or meditation, is the one-pointed continuous movement of the mind toward a single object. But Patanjali's technique can be used for concentration on any object, not just on God. And even though he tells his readers the point of his sutras — to get closer to God — one may be tempted to use his methods for selfish ends, as he says later in the text. Ultimately, one-pointed concentration is for focusing on God, though it is not until one graduates to the Bhagavad Gita that one clearly learns how to do this.

As Professor Edwin Bryant points out in his excellent article, "Patanjali's Theistic Preference, Or, Was the Author of the Yoga Sutras a Vaishnava?"[30] Patanjali was trying to gear his diverse audience toward the worship of the Supreme Personality of Godhead, even if he was doing so in a roundabout way. Much like today, many forms of religion beleaguered the India of his time; practitioners worshipped numerous aspects of the Supreme. Consequently, he opted for a stepwise approach in his Yoga Sutras that he believed would accommodate his varied audience.

Still, he asserts that the ultimate object of meditation is ishvara, which means "controller" and generally refers to God. Although there are many controllers and many forms of the Godhead, Bhagavad Gita (18.61) says that the ultimate ishvara is Krishna. Other texts tell us this as well.

Consider the ancient Brahma-samhita (5.1):

éçvaraù paramaù kåñëaù
sac-cid-änanda-vigrahaù
anädir ädir govindaù
sarva-käraëa-käraëam

"Krishna, who is known as Govinda, is the Supreme Godhead (ishvarah paramah). He has an eternal blissful spiritual body. He is the origin of all. He has no other origin, and He is the prime cause of all causes."

Patanjali advises his audience to choose an ista-devata, a deity of their choice. His reasoning is transparent: he is trying to teach a method of meditation, and learning this method is easiest if one practices on a subject close to one's heart.

Did Patanjali have Krishna in mind when he outlined the yoga process and its goal of love for God? For one learned in the Vedic literature, it is obvious that the answer is yes. In the words of Edwin Bryant:

> Krishna is…promoted by the Gita as possessing all the…qualities listed by Patanjali as pertaining to ishvara, namely, being transcendental to karma, of unsurpassed omniscience, teacher of the ancients, untouched by Time, represented by om, and awarding enlightenment. Krishna is not touched or bound by karma (Gita, 4.14, 9.9), and, in terms of omniscience, he is the beginning, middle and end of all (10.20 & 32), who pervades the entire universe with but a single fragment of himself (10.42). Krishna taught the ancients (here specified as Vivasvan, the sun god, who in turn imparted knowledge to Manu, the progenitor of mankind [4.1]) and is himself Time (10.30 & 33; 9.32). He is also the syllable om (9.17). And, of course, Krishna assures his devotees that he will free them from the snares of this world such that they attain the supreme goal (9.30-32; 10.10; 8.58). There is thus perfect compatibility between Patanjali's unnamed ishvara and Krishna as depicted in the Gita.[31]
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> The commentarial tradition of the Yoga Sutras bears this out. Patanjali's major commentators were Vyasa (Fifth century CE, not to be confused with the compiler of the Vedic literature), Vachaspati Mishra (Ninth century CE), Bhoja Raja (Eleventh century CE), and Vijnanabhikshu (Sixteenth century CE). All identify the ishvara of the Yoga Sutras with Vishnu or Krishna, and show how the Bhagavad Gita expresses the culmination of all Vedic wisdom relating to yoga.

The Bhagavad Gita's Four Yogas

Krishna summarizes various forms of yoga in the Gita's eighteen chapters. In essence, there are four kinds: raja-yoga involves sitting postures, breath control, and meditation, and is popular today in the form of hatha-yoga. Bhakti-yoga is the yoga of devotion, karma-yoga the yoga of selfless action, and jnana-yoga the yoga of knowledge.

While the paths differ, their fundamental goal is the same: to realize that God is the core of our being and that life is meant for dedicating ourselves to His service. Yoga in all its varieties seeks to bring its practitioners beyond the usual identification with the body and the mind, situating one in transcendence. Thus, Patanjali codified a means by which one could master one's senses, ultimately leading to the goal of yoga. His method is a type of raja-yoga.

But the other yoga systems are more direct, fostering relationship and even intimacy with God. And of all the yogas, bhakti is the best, because it puts its practitioners in an immediate relationship with God in His most intimate, personal and loving form, as Sri Krishna, thus achieving the goal of yoga in an easy and natural way.

The Gita's Eight Limbs

The Bhagavad Gita addresses all eight limbs of raja-yoga, the form of yoga popular today as ashtanga-yoga or hatha-yoga.[32] For example, yama, the first limb, consists of five ethical principles: truthfulness, continence, non-violence, non-covetousness, and abstention from stealing. These fundamental disciplines of yoga are mentioned in the Gita, as is niyama, the second limb, which consists of things like worship, cleanliness, contentment, austerity, and self-reflection.

The third limb of Patanjali's method, asana, is less obvious in the Gita. The term asana appears infrequently on Lord Krishna's lips. But when it does, it refers to "the place where one sits for spiritual practice." The Gita does not give tips on sitting postures. Its Sixth Chapter, though, comes close. Verses 11 and 12 state: "To practice yoga, one should go to a secluded place and should lay

kusha grass on the ground and then cover it with a deerskin and a soft cloth. The seat (asana) should be neither too high nor too low, and should be situated in a sacred place. The yogi should then sit on it very firmly and practice yoga to purify the heart by controlling his mind, senses and activities and fixing the mind on one point."

Here, Krishna uses the word asana in a general rather than technical sense. He is talking about sitting to focus the mind. It is easy to lose focus, and this is basically Arjuna's argument against hatha-yoga in general. In fact, Patanjali himself identifies nine obstacles on the path: doubt, disease, lethargy, mental laziness, false perception, lack of enthusiasm, clinging to sense enjoyment, lack of concentration, and losing concentration. His commentators list several others as well, including inordinate attraction to yogic powers, a misconceived view of meditation, oversimplification of yoga's eight limbs, and irregularity of practice. All of these problems are traceable to the difficult nature of Patanjali's method, and are why Arjuna views hatha-yoga as virtually impossible. By the end of the Sixth Chapter, he denounces it as too difficult. Krishna agrees, telling Arjuna that the ultimate yogi always thinks of God. He further tells him that such meditation is real yoga, implying that using one's body and mind in Krishna's service is the perfect asana.

The Gita also discusses pranayama, or breath control, the fourth limb. Krishna says that yogis can use the incoming and outgoing breath as offerings to Him. He speaks about dedicating one's life-breath to God. He tells Arjuna that His devotees' prana, or air of life, is meant for God, and that Arjuna should use it "to come to Me."

In fact, if one follows Arjuna's example and offers every breath to Krishna — by speaking about Him, chanting His glories, and living for Him — there is little need for breath control as delineated in Patanjali's sutras. Breathing for God is the essence of pranayama. Swami Prabhupada, the founder and guru of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, writes, "Chanting of the holy name of the Lord and dancing in ecstasy are also considered pranayama." (Srimad Bhagavatam 4.23.8, purport)

The fifth limb of yoga, pratyahara, deals with the withdrawal of the senses, a major subject in the Bhagavad Gita. In the Second Chapter, Krishna tells Arjuna that the yogi withdraws his senses from sense objects, "as the tortoise draws its limbs within the shell." Taken superficially, this might seem to suggest full renunciation of the world. But that is not what Krishna is getting at. Rather, as other verses make clear, He is teaching how to renounce the fruits of work, not work itself, and how to be in the world but not of it. In other words, His teaching centers on how to withdraw one's attachment to sense objects for personal enjoyment. He instructs us to use these same objects in the service of God. That is true pratyahara.

The Upper Limbs

And then we have the culmination of yoga practice, the last three limbs of raja-yoga: dharana, dhyana, and samadhi, or concentration, meditation, and complete absorption, respectively.

While yama and niyama are preliminary steps, these three are called samyama, "the perfect discipline" or "perfect practice." The Bhagavad Gita speaks extensively of these upper limbs. For example, Lord Krishna states, "Just fix your mind upon Me, the Supreme Personality of Godhead, and engage all your intelligence in Me. Thus you will live in Me always, without a doubt. My dear Arjuna, O winner of wealth, if you cannot fix your mind upon Me without deviation, then follow the regulative principles of bhakti-yoga (abhyasa-yogena). In this way develop a desire to attain Me." (BG 12.8–9)

The process of Krishna Consciousness is practical dharana, or spiritual concentration. By seeing paintings of Krishna, we use our sense of sight for God; by chanting and hearing, we engage the tongue and the ear; by offering incense to Krishna, we engage our sense of smell. All the senses can help us engage in dharana, leading to advanced states of meditation and absorption.

The holy name is particularly effective in this regard. That is why Krishna says that, of austerities, He is the austerity of japa, solitary chanting, especially while counting on beads. Chanting is the king of austerities because, by chanting, we can easily reach the goal of yoga. It all comes together in the practice of japa because, by chanting God's names, we focus on Him with our voice, ears, and sense of touch. And kirtana, congregational chanting, not only takes us to deep levels of absorption, but engages the senses of onlookers as well. So it is considered even more powerful. In sutra 1.28, Patanjali, too, promotes "constant chanting."

Conclusion

Overall, Patanjali's ambivalence might appear confusing. When he first mentions ishvara pranidhana, dedication to God, he presents it as optional, while later he gives it far more attention, with six verses elaborating on the nature of ishvara. In the beginning, he seems to allow for freedom of choice in the object of meditation (1.34-38), as already mentioned, but ultimately, he advises the yogi to focus on ishvara, who, in Patanjali's words, is the "special supreme soul" who alone can bestow samadhi, or yogic perfection.

Patanjali says in sutra 3.3 that samadhi occurs when the object of your meditation appears in your heart of hearts without any competitors or distractions. You have no other interest, as if your intrinsic nature loses meaning.

The Bhagavad Gita makes it clearer. In samadhi, your intrinsic nature does not lose meaning. Rather, it takes on new meaning: you see yourself in relation to Krishna. You are now His devotee; He's the focus of your life. That state of perfect and total absorption is called Krishna Consciousness.

Book Review: The Embankment of Separation

by Gour Govinda Swami (Orissa, India: Gopal Jiu Publications, 1996)

The Embankment of Separation is an invaluable devotional work — and although the theme is divine separation, I urge all potential readers to procure this book immediately. Beautifully designed and well-edited, this literary gem is compiled from a series of lectures that gives a genuine taste for a distinct brand of Krishna-bhakti, one that harmonizes the truths of Vrindavana-dhama and Navadvipa-dhama with the mysteries of Jagannatha Puri-dhama.

It is truly refreshing to read a book that could have easily fallen into one of two categories: the dry, scholarly approach (for the late Gour Govinda Maharaja is indeed a scholar of the highest order), or a hackneyed, repetitive practitioner perspective (for he is also a devotee par excellence). Instead, it embodies the best of both models. It is a work of lively devotional scholarship.

Its subject is deep — the deepest — but it is presented in a way that allows even the most neophyte devotee a clear understanding. This is so because it starts with a discussion of lobha, or "greed," contrasting and highlighting various nuances of it as it is found in both material and spiritual worlds. Obviously, material greed is not particularly desirable, but spiritual greed is necessary for proper advancement.

That the book begins with lobha is significant because it is only through such lobha that one may enter into more advanced topics. After lobha, the book proceeds to discuss aisvarya-bhava (the powerful majesty of Vaikuntha), giving insights into the spiritual lobha of certain incarnations of Vishnu and His devotees. But it is when the book goes beyond discussions of matter and spirit, spiritual greed, aisvarya-bhava, and Vishnu's incarnations, that the pages really come to life. Then the book's real purpose becomes clear, taking readers, methodically, from the initial adhikara for raganuga-bhakti (i.e., lobha) to gambhira-lila, Sri Chaitanya's deepest, most profound pastimes (gambhira literally means "deep").

In this sense of gradual unfolding, the book is much like the Srimad Bhagavatam, which mandates a reading of its first nine cantos before offering its readers the nectar of the Tenth. By preparing readers for the weighty subject of Krishna's pastimes, the Bhagavatam gradually takes one to the point of being able to understand the profound nature of its contents.

The Embankment of Separation also opens with basic spiritual paradigms, and in this, Gour Govinda Maharaja guides his readers like an expert swimming instructor, carefully teaching them how to stay afloat in an ocean of nectar. This facilitates a clear understanding of the more advanced, preternatural leanings found in the latter half of the book.

The Embankment of Separation is essentially about love for Krishna in the mood of separation, viraha-bhakti, as is evident from the title. Srila Prabhupada explains in Nectar of Devotion (p. 355) that viraha-bhakti (also known as vipralambha-bhava) manifests in three stages: purva-raga, or preliminary attraction, wherein there is a feeling that the two lovers might not meet; mana, or indignation, occurs when there is some sense of jealousy that Krishna may be with someone else; and pravasa, or separation by distance, manifests when one's beloved lives somewhere else, as when Krishna left for Mathura. Maharaja elaborates on these three stages, if not by name, then at least in essence, in the book's final chapters.

Early in the book, Maharaja establishes the preeminent position of Srimati Radharani. He tells the story of her intense mana (spiritual indignation) when she hears of Krishna's meeting with Chandravali. She is so upset that She will not see Him, and so Yogamaya, through the agency of Vrinda-devi, devises a plan in which Krishna must give up everything and approach Radha in a form she will not recognize. He will make any sacrifice for His beloved, and so He goes to see her as a sannyasi. But when He sees her beautiful face, He cannot maintain His disguise, and He once again assumes His three-fold-bending form as Krishna.

This theme continues by exploring how Lord Chaitanya's form represents a sambhoga, or union, in which Radha and Krishna again reunite to experience deep, loving sentiments. But Gour Govinda Maharaja takes this further, explaining that Lord Chaitanya is actually a merger between sambhoga

and vipralambha — opposites in one body. He explains the mechanics of this using scripture and logic. This carries the reader to the chapter on the holy name and prema (divine love), where Maharaja describes the deep love of Uddhava and the gopis in a way that resolves the apparent dichotomy between union and separation. After this, three chapters are devoted to Jagannatha Puri, where the Lord plays in these divine mysteries, with special attention to Mahaprabhu and Lord Jagannatha.

All of this leads to the deepest aspect of Lord Chaitanya's pastimes. The Gambhira is the garden house into which Lord Chaitanya's intimate followers, such as Swarupa Damodara and Raya Ramananda, locked Him. They felt the Lord's ecstatic symptoms were reaching a point where He might wander off in total oblivion or hurt Himself.

Gour Govinda Maharaja explains the inner meaning of these things with such mastery that it leaves little doubt that he was experiencing something profound in his own life. More importantly, he explains these phenomena in such a way that the reader is carried there with him. This is the true greatness of The Embankment of Separation: it creates in its readers the desire for an experience of longing for God. It also reminds the reader of the distance one must travel in his own practice. While one's journey may be long, little drops of advanced nectar, such as those found in this book, can do much to soothe the weary traveler and revive his determination to continue the quest.

A Fight to Remember: ISKCON Russia and the Politics of Persecution

Round I: "And in this corner…"

It was early evening on July 11, 1972. Chess enthusiasts filled a sports arena in Reykjavik, Iceland, while millions watched on TV and listened on the radio. In what was dubbed "the match of the century," Bobby Fischer challenged Boris Spassky, the Russian world chess champion, for the title, knowing full well that emerging victorious would have implications for the Cold War.

Just one year earlier, Srîla Prabhupada had been developing a strategy to bring God into a godless Soviet Russia. If we think of Prabhupada's quest as a sort of chess match, it would have seemed that Prabhupada had few pieces on the board, while the Soviets had all the most powerful pieces and occupied all the key squares. But even one pawn or knight backed by the most powerful king and queen may sometimes checkmate castle fortresses and brilliant strategists. The story of Prabhupada's victory eclipses that of the World Chess Championship of 1972.

Srila Prabhupada had initially tried to come to the USSR as an official representative of Indian culture, writing a letter proclaiming his intent to the Ministry of Culture. But he was denied entrance without explanation. Finally, after several attempts, he was given a tourist visa that allowed him a short stay, even if he was not allowed to lecture at Moscow University. The lecture had been one of his reasons for wanting to visit.

Still, Prabhupada's five days on Russian soil provided him ample opportunity to position himself well for the eventual checkmate his movement would play in Soviet Russia. His initial strategy emerged when, through his disciple and secretary, Syamasundara Dasa, he met a young Russian seeker, Anatoly Pinyayev, who would soon become Ananta-shanti Dasa, his courageous, lone student in the Soviet Union. Another forward move was Prabhupada's talk with Professor G. G. Kotovsky, then head of the Indian and South Asian Studies Department of the Soviet Union's Academy of Sciences.

Prabhupada left a distinct impression on Professor Kotovsky, who got their conversation published in an important Russian periodical.[33] But it was Ananta-shanti who took Prabhupada's message to heart, single-handedly and vigorously sharing what he had learned with hundreds of Soviet people, many of whom became devotees. After meeting the enthusiastic Russian, Prabhupada had remarked, "Just as you can judge whether rice is properly cooked by picking out one small grain, so you can know an entire nation by observing one of its hand-picked youths."

Next, in 1977 and 1979, the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust received an invitation to the prestigious Moscow International Book Fair, acquainting Moscovites with Prabhupada's books for the first time. The New York Times , on July 31, 1983, noted the significance: "(The exhibit) drew curious Russians, the books spread, and Hare Krishna was on its way in Russia."

But by 1980, under Brezhnev's rule, several devotees were thrown into prison, initiating a tense and often traumatic relationship between ISKCON and the Soviet Union. By 1982, Yuri Andropov was in power, and he intensified the campaign already underway against the Hare Krishna movement. He saw devotees as representing all things religious and was determined to wipe them out. Because of Ananta-shanti's contagious enthusiasm and the staggering results of the book fairs, Viktor Chebrikov, the Deputy Chairman of the KGB, the Soviet secret police, under Andropov, said, "There are three main threats to the Soviet regime: pop music, Coca-Cola, and Hare Krishna."

Such pronouncements, and the sentiments that fueled them, led to intense persecution, not only of Hare Krishna devotees but also of Hindus living in Russia.

Round II: Devotees in Russia — La Creme De La Kremlin

And so, with ISKCON declared one of the great threats to the Soviet nation, an ongoing battle ensued. But this was no Fischer versus Spassky, two equal adversaries pitted against each other. This was a war conducted by a totalitarian state against a relatively small number of Krishna devotees. Consequently, hundreds of Russian Hindus, along with ISKCON's new Soviet faithful, were thrown into prisons, labor camps, and psychiatric hospitals, suffering vicious mistreatment at the hands of the police and political yes-men. Several devotees died in prison, clinging tightly to their faith while being tortured in various ways.[34]

Harikesa Swami, then ISKCON's Governing Body Commissioner for Russia, would not stand for such horrors. A driving force for reform, he made the Russian tragedy a worldwide concern. Numerous devotees and friends of ISKCON, under the guidance of Kirtiraja Dasa, then a leading devotee in that part of the world, held international protests and wrote letters to prominent people on behalf of the Soviet devotees. Supportive voices were heard at the Reagan-Gorbachev summit in 1985 in Geneva, at the United Nations, and in international newspapers. At the November 1986 meeting in Vienna of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the international organization that monitors compliance with the human rights provisions of the Helsinki Act, Hare Krishna members again called attention to the plight of imprisoned Soviet devotees.

The situation culminated later that year when Prahlada, a pre-teen ISKCON devotee from New Zealand, joined in Kirtiraja's efforts. He and "The Krishna Kids" recorded an album on the international EMI label, one of the world's largest record companies. The album included the song "Free the Soviet Krishnas," a plea to Gorbachev that was also released as a single. Prahlada appeared frequently on television and radio to promote the album and share his concern for the devotees in Russia. Gorbachev eventually gave word from on high that the devotees should be freed, marking a new beginning for religion in the former Soviet Union.

Round III: Pawns, Fake-Outs, and Half Victories

On a beautiful spring day in 1988, the Soviet Union's Council for Religious Affairs officially registered the Moscow Society for Krishna Consciousness (MOSK), concluding, or so it seemed, a long-standing feud between the devotees and the state. Now devotees could chant in public and practice their religion freely. That same year, over 1,600 new religious communities, most of them Russian Orthodox, were registered.

Something was clearly brewing, and many experts attributed the change, in large measure, to the devotees. Only two years later, responding to MOSK requests, Moscow authorities allotted a dilapidated two-story building to be used as a temple. After the devotees renovated the property, they opened the first ISKCON temple in the history of Russia and the Soviet Union, a temple frequented by large numbers of Hindus as well.

Moreover, in 1991, MOSK applied for a plot of land to build an authentic Vedic temple and cultural center in Moscow, a huge project. Surprisingly, the application was approved, and devotees began looking for a suitable location. It seemed the government was willing to give the Russian devotees whatever they wanted.

This did not last long. Water seeks its own level, and Russian authorities soon succumbed to the same religious prejudices they had known in the past. In 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed, and the long-suppressed Russian Orthodox Church experienced a resurgence in the Russian Federation that followed it. The Bishops' Council of the Russian Orthodox Church made an official statement, calling the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita the product of a "false religion." And they called all other religions a threat to the unity of national consciousness and cultural identity.

In 1997, a bill passed by the Russian Parliament (Duma) recognized the Russian Orthodox Church as the sole, preeminent religion of the Russian Federation, with an addendum acknowledging only three other "traditional" Russian faiths: Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism. Other religions would not have the same legal status or any support for their missionary work.

But the devotees, again, would not be intimidated. The ISKCON temple had become the only place of worship for over ten thousand Indians. Throughout the 1990s, Hinduism in Russia began to flourish, resulting in 97 registered Hindu communities, 22 monasteries, and 250 home groups, all supporting ISKCON and its work.

As the new millennium dawned, the Prime Minister of India, A. B. Vajpayee, learned about ISKCON's work among Russian Hindus from Russian administrators. Despite the gracious approval of Vajpayee, the government of Moscow decided to renovate the area surrounding ISKCON's longstanding temple, threatening the devotees' practice of Krishna Consciousness once again.

And so it was that, in 2004, the Moscow government took back the building and destroyed it according to city renovation plans. With growling bulldozers and soldiers surveying the area, the destruction of ISKCON's Russian temple was reminiscent of the demolition work undertaken by Muslims in Medieval India, where many renowned temples were systematically razed. Although this was the first time such atrocities would take place on Western soil, at least one thing harkened back to the Indian prototype: now, as then, thousands of devotees were deprived of their place of worship.

Seeking support, MOSK asked prominent Indian politicians to help. By this time, Vajpayee, the former Prime Minister, had been following the events in Russia for several years. He met with devotees on numerous occasions, both in India and in Moscow, to map out the best way to resolve their dilemma.

In January 2004, after many years of struggle, the mayor of Moscow finally signed an order proclaiming that land would be given for a new ISKCON temple, in a prominent Moscow location and free of charge, no doubt at the behest of important Indian politicians. The land was on the main road from the Kremlin to the international airport, about a ten-minute drive from the heart of Moscow. The devotees happily relocated to a temporary building on their newly-acquired land and were prepared to develop their new temple complex.

It was not long, however, before the Russian Orthodox Church, along with Muslim and Jewish authorities, began to speak out against the construction, opining that the entire Krishna Consciousness movement was a religion against the Russian tradition. Protestors rallied in Pushkin Square, in the center of the capital, brandishing icons, flags, and banners with warnings like "Krishna Followers Are Brainwashed" and "Friends, Defend Your Faith. We Oppose the Expansion of Sects. Beware!"

The protests offended the nearly 100,000 followers of Lord Krishna spread across the country. In response, Russia's Indian community, led by Sanjit Kumar Jha, President of the Association of Indians in Russia, retaliated, and a vehement back-and-forth surfaced yet again. Though the devotees knew that Krishna would ultimately emerge victorious, it now looked like the odds were against them. As sure as Spassky landed some strategic moves in the early rounds of the Fischer-Spassky match, the Kremlin now seemed to be getting the upper hand. In October 2005, the mayor of Moscow, Yury Luzhkov, suddenly reversed the order for ISKCON's land, and the temple was demolished.

Conveniently, the office of the city executive attorney found legal discrepancies in the wording of the Moscow government's original order and decided to revise it. The revision was merely a form of subterfuge so that they could gradually cancel it altogether. In short, the devotees now had no home and no outlet for their practice or their preaching.

That being the case, they were inundated with journalists and reporters from major newspapers, radio shows, and TV networks, including the main Russian TV-news program, Vremyachko. His Holiness Bhakti Vijnana Goswami, President of ISKCON Russia, was interviewed, as were prominent members of the Indian community, who made their outrage clear. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad stepped in, agreeing to mount a "Defend Russian Hindus" campaign. Dignitaries from India and Russia came forward, until their voices were heard loud and clear.

Round IV: Endgame — "And the winner is…"

The Moscow mayor finally allocated land to MOSK, despite objections by the Orthodox Church, which threatened to renew its protests against the construction. But the die was cast, and overturning the mayor's decisions seems highly unlikely. Devotees played a winning move.

The significance of a final and abiding land allocation should be clearly understood. Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism, along with the Russian Orthodox Church, are Russia's traditional religions, deemed part of Russia's heritage. But the Hare Krishna religion — Vaishnavism, and even its Hindu relatives — is not part of that exclusive group, which makes the land grant a coup of historic proportions. Land was not awarded to Catholic and Protestant sects; the only Christian sect to get land was the Russian Orthodox Church. Only ISKCON and the other three accepted religions received land.

An important voice influencing the mayor's decision was that of Delhi Chief Minister Sheila Dikshit, who had come to Russia for the Delhi Culture Fest and to renew diplomatic relations. She was incensed by the entire temple debacle and insisted that the situation be corrected at once.

Earlier, the issue had been raised at various diplomatic meetings, with Russian President Vladimir Putin assuring Indian Prime Minister Man Mohan Singh that he would look into the matter. Apparently, he did.

K. Raghunath, India's ambassador to Russia, made the following comment in a speech aired nationwide:

> I would also like to speak a few words in address to the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON). We are close to this organization. ISKCON attained a wonderful success in spreading the philosophy of the Bhagavad Gita and implementing it in everyday life. Besides this, ISKCON works hard to preserve and protect the unparalleled culture of India.

ISKCON also deserves glorification for strengthening the friendly bond between Russia and India.

The campaign to build the new temple, known as "Temple of the Heart," is receiving support from patrons around the world.

The autumn of 2006 witnessed a new dawn for ISKCON Russia: more than six thousand people, mostly Indians, came to the still-unfinished, but beautiful temple to celebrate Janmashtami, the anniversary of Lord Krishna's advent in this world. In attendance were the ambassadors of Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Mauritius and the Director of the J. Nehru Cultural Center. One year later, also on Janmashtami, MOSK signed a contract to proceed with architectural plans for the new temple. That day they also secured the governmental approvals and permits needed to start building.

Though some intrigue lingered, with special interest groups trying to thwart the work, nothing could stop the devotees now. They had important political leaders on their side, and the public had become fully aware of the situation. Any attempt to stop the project would become prominent in the news. Because of the determined efforts of the devotees, the Indian government, and other international entities, ISKCON Russia is now on solid ground.

"It was all Krishna's arrangement," says Bhakti Vijnana Goswami, one of ISKCON's Governing Body Commissioners in Moscow (with Niranjana Swami and Gopala Krishna Goswami). "Through all the political machinations and the difficult times, we ended up with the best possible temple grounds. It's much better land than we had before, and quite reminiscent of Vrindavana, where Krishna came to earth five thousand years ago. It's a bit away from the center of the city, and it's in the midst of beautiful rivers, rolling mountains, and a gorgeous forest area. Krishna knew what He was doing. Hundreds of thousands of people will come here to learn mantra meditation and the philosophy of Krishna Consciousness."

Even in 2003, while going through more trying times, the devotees knew considerable success: almost 6,000 people visited the temple that year, and an additional 14,500 schoolchildren observed temple services as part of mandatory classroom experience. Devotees chanted regularly on Moscow streets, distributed prasadam widely, and put over 160,000 books into Russian hands.

Naturally, with the new temple, things have only intensified. The Indian congregation numbers around 15,000 people, many of them students at colleges and other institutions of higher learning. Many native Moscovites have become full-time devotees or attend ISKCON's temple services and festivals throughout the year. Prabhupada's books now appear in ten of Russia's official languages, and more than eleven million copies of his Bhagavad Gita as It Is, in Russian translation, have been distributed.

ISKCON in Russia has also been active in charity work. Its Food for Life volunteers have given out over one million bowls of hot porridge, freshly baked bread, and tea to the needy. Risking their lives, devotees in Russia have gone on humanitarian missions to war zones like Chechnya and Abkhazia to feed refugees, as well as to earthquake victims in the far east of Russia. Hare Krishna Food for Life was the only Russia-based non-governmental charity organization working in these areas.

Prominent ISKCON devotees from around the world have visited the fledgling Moscow temple, considered its leaders' vision for the future, and come away deeply impressed. They could not help but acknowledge its potential and its worldwide ramifications.

Bhakti Tirtha Swami (1950–2005), soon before he left this world, said, "We are noticing that the Russian devotees are some of the most enthusiastic devotees in the world. So many devotees are being made, so much preaching opportunity, so many people are coming forth. Therefore, we need something very grand, very wonderful, to accommodate all of these people… History will show how the devotees in CIS, and Russia in particular, were empowered to establish this most grand and glorious, famous and fabulous, temple."

"We are excited," he continued. "We want to encourage as many people as possible to support this effort, because it is an effort not just for CIS, or for Russia, but…it is something for the whole world, something Srila Prabhupada himself very much wanted. He was so concerned about preaching throughout the world, and in his last days he expressed a special concern about the preaching in the Communist countries."

Radhanath Swami, too, was recently outspoken about the far-reaching potential of the project in Russia: "I sincerely believe that building this temple in Moscow is one of the most important projects in the history of the Hare Krishna movement."

"Srila Prabhupada personally went to Moscow in the early 1970s," says Radhanath Swami, "and

although it was behind the Iron Curtain, where atheism and Communism were prominent, Srila Prabhupada saw immense potential in the people of Russia to accept the doctrine of pure, unalloyed love for Sri Krishna. And so he wrote that if the devotees sincerely worked together…this temple would be built. And he stated emphatically that it would be a great triumph."

Bhakti Charu Swami also spoke eloquently about the significance of the devotees' work in the former Soviet Union: "Who could have imagined that Krishna Consciousness would spread in Russia? But Chaitanya Mahaprabhu predicted that the Krishna Consciousness movement would spread to every town and village of the world, and He is the Supreme Personality of Godhead — so His prediction will never go in vain."

Concludes Bhakti Vijnana Goswami: "The establishment of this temple in Russia is huge — historically, symbolically, emotionally, and spiritually. The temple will also be huge in size, accommodating thousands of devotees, visitors, and seekers. We are already seeing this on a practical level, and its impact is second only to temples in India. In the long run, its influence will be felt all over the world, not only in Eastern Europe, Russia, and the former Soviet Union. It will have huge meaning for ISKCON and beyond ISKCON, all over the world."

Boris Spassky lost his contest with Bobby Fischer. Though Russian chess pros had held the title for more than forty years, this was the first time a Soviet player would enter the match as an underdog. In chess, superior strategy always wins in the end, but in life, it is always best to be on the side of the righteous. As the Bhagavad Gita tells us in its concluding verse, "Wherever there is Krishna, the master of all mystics, and wherever there is Arjuna, the supreme archer, there will also certainly be opulence, victory, extraordinary power, and morality." Nearly every Moscovite now benefits from Prabhupada's books and the holy name of Krishna, which is a winning move. And though Red Square is still the most famous city square in Moscow, the Temple of the Heart will soon have everyone in check.

Postscript: Attempt to Ban Bhagavad Gita as It Is

Since this article was originally written, a new chapter in the saga of Krishna Consciousness in Russia took place. In June 2011, the public prosecutor in Tomsk, a city in Siberia, filed a complaint against the Russian translation of Bhagavad Gita as It Is, claiming that it should be banned as "extremist literature" on the grounds that Srila Prabhupada's commentaries foster religious hatred and social chaos. After a series of court hearings and public outcry from both the Indian government and devotees from around the globe, Federal Judge Galina Butenko dismissed the charges on the grounds that there was insufficient evidence in the book to support the prosecution's claims. The Tomsk prosecutor's office attempted to appeal the verdict, but the appeal was rejected in March 2012.

ISKCON in Russia has won yet another victory, but it seems likely that the challenges devotees will face there have not yet come to an end.

Engaged Vaishnavism: Are Devotees concerned with Making the World a Better Place?

"Philosophy has little or no meaning unless it produces a good character."–Radhanath Swami

How we behave in the material world is, to a great degree, a reflection of how we identify ourselves as living beings. If we think of ourselves as material bodies, as most people do, then our primary focus would be the material world and the assorted interactions that apparently enhance our stay here. We become absorbed in bodily appetites, making a good living, raising a family, and so on.

If, however, we develop a sense that there is something more to life — that we are spiritual beings living within a material body — t hen our focus will naturally shift to an inner reality, and to our actual life as spiritual souls. This is not, of course, to the exclusion of material concerns, but as an underlying necessity and priority that nourishes those concerns.

There is an art to doing this — to using the material world in a spiritual way. It is called yukta-vairagya, and it was developed into a science by the followers of Sri Chaitanya. Under the leadership of Rupa Goswami, His foremost disciple, the Chaitanya Vaishnavas of old, represented by the Hare Krishna movement today, formulated a detailed methodology for acting like the spirit-souls we are, for being in the world but not of it.

Accordingly, devotees in general are not committed to any mundane social, economic, or political paradigm. Our commitment is to bhakti, or devotional service to the Supreme, with an emphasis, again, on the spiritual side of things. This is not to say that we are anarchists or antinomians of any kind. We acknowledge our personal or civic responsibility to maintain order in the material world, whether social, economic or political. Sanskrit texts call this responsibility loka-samgraha, or "the holding together of the material world." This is effected on an individual-by-individual basis, wherein devotees evaluate the respective merits or demerits of a given mundane system, and decide whether to participate in it, influence it, and so on, as our conscience and practical judgment move us.

Although our Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition, ably represented by Srila Prabhupada, focuses on spiritual welfare work — namely, helping others advance toward Krishna and the spiritual world — and although many quotations could be cited to show that this focus eclipses any tendency toward mundane charity, this article will attempt to show another side of the tradition, one that is sometimes neglected or overlooked.

Indeed, the writings of the great acharyas heavily emphasize the importance of helping people spiritually, almost to the point of excluding material welfare work from their teachings. There is a reason for this, along the lines of "Give a man a fish, feed him for a day; teach a man to fish, feed him for a lifetime" (Lao Tzu). This is not to encourage fishing, of course, but, rather, to highlight the principle of long-term solutions as being superior to short-term ones.

In fact, material solutions are all short-term, for they pertain to the perishable body. All virtue and social activity that focuses on the body falls into oblivion once the body is finished. And it will be finished. It is just a matter of time. Devotees, on the other hand, are taught to see long-term, tending to the needs of the soul. This is social activity that abides, for the soul is eternal.

And yet Vaishnavas tend to be soft-hearted, feeling the suffering of other living entities, and while their primary concern is for everyone's spiritual welfare, they do not like to see anyone feeling hurt or loss, in any sense of the word.

In recent years, Buddhism has become popular because of adherents' engagement with the material world. Buddhists, without doubt, seek to meditate and develop their inner, contemplative life — this is the real stuff of the Buddhist tradition — but they also acknowledge the importance of the here and now, of helping people and working to make the world a better place. This is called "Engaged Buddhism."

Vaishnavas, too, as already stated, are concerned about the material world. Like Buddhists, we recognize that the material world is full of suffering, and that it will always be a place where birth, death, old age, and disease take prominence. But Vaishnavas "feel the suffering of others," and so, like Buddhists, they work hard to alleviate this suffering, even if they necessarily do so with an overarching spiritual component.

For example, Vaishnavas will serve food to the hungry, but they will make sure this food is prasadam, offered to Krishna. This spiritualizes their act of charity, allowing the beneficiary to not only have the nutrition that he or she needs but also to advance on the spiritual path.

All this being said, the great Krishna-conscious teacher, Bhaktivinoda Thakur, wrote unremittingly about the necessity for "Engaged Vaishnavism," if without using that particular phrase:

> Those who think that devotion to God and kindness to the jivas [souls] are mutually different from each other, and perform accordingly in their life, such persons will not be able to follow the devotional culture. Their performances are only a semblance of devotion. Therefore, all the types of beneficence to others, like kindness, friendliness, forgiveness, charity, respect, and so on, are included in bhakti. Among these, according to the triple categories of the recipients. viz., high, medium and low. The actions of respect, friendliness and kindness are the very form of love and the characteristic portion of bhakti: charity of medicines, clothes, food, water, etc., shelter during adversities, teaching of academic and spiritual educations, etc., are the activities included in the devotional culture.[35]

And again Bhaktivinoda writes:

> One should be merciful and not cause anxiety to any living entity. The heart should always be filled with compassion for others. Exhibiting mercy to all living entities is one of the limbs of devotional service.[36]

This same mood was expressed by Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati Thakur, Bhaktivinoda's illustrious son and the spiritual master of His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada:

> [The devotee] feels no apathy or attachment to mundane morality. On the other hand, morality waits like a maidservant to assist spiritual morality in the service of the Lord of Transcendental Love. At the same time we should understand that the character of one culturing spiritual love is never devoid of morality. One hostile to morality or fallen from it can never be a spiritual man. In the blazing core of the teaching of Shri Chaitanya Deva's ideal — debauchery is not devotion. The evidence is abundant when reflecting on the character of Sri Chaitanya Deva and his followers.[37]

Prabhupada himself indicates that ethics and morals — in other words, cultivating a sense of goodness in the material world — is a forerunner of pure bhakti and can aid in one's spiritual journey:

> Yes, ethics is the basic principle of purification. Unless one…knows what is moral and what is immoral… Of course, in this material world everything is immoral, but still we have to distinguish good and bad. That is called regulative principle. Simply by following the regulative principle, if he does not reach the ultimate goal of spiritual life, so that is also not wanted. The real aim is to come to the spiritual platform and become free from the influence of these laws of material nature.
>
> So passion is the binding force in the material nature. Just like in the prison house, the prisoners are kept sometimes chained by some iron shackles and other method, so material nature has given the chain, shackles, of sex life, passion, rajas tamah. Kama esa krodha esa rajo-guna-samudbhavah. Rajah-gunah means the modes of passion. So modes of passion means kama, lusty desires, and krodha. When the lusty desires are not fulfilled, one becomes angry. But these things are the means of bondage in this material world.
>
> In another place it is said, tada rajas-tamo-bhavah kama-lobhadayas ca ye. When one is afflicted with the base material modes of nature, namely rajo-guna and tamo-guna, then he becomes greedy and lusty. So ethics require to get out of the clutches of greediness and lusty desires. Then he comes to the platform of goodness, which will help him to go to the platform of spiritual life.[38] -- Dialectical Spiritualism, Prabhupada on Socrates

It might be said that some of the above quotes focus on personal relationships and ethics as opposed to social welfare work. But the interrelation should not be overlooked, and the essence is the same. We are talking about a compassionate heart, a spiritually evolved individual who cannot bear the suffering of others. In other words, a devotee wants to see people happy, materially and also spiritually.

Scholars outside the movement, too, recognize that devotees are naturally good people, seeking to help the world and those within it. Here are the words of Joseph T. O'Connell, Professor Emeritus of Bengali Studies at the University of Toronto:

> Among the virtues most stressed in formation of ideal devotional character are humility, helpful service, non-violence, curtailment of sensual indulgence, bringing an accommodating attitude to situations of potential conflict, relativizing mundane social roles as constructs of maya, "illusion," which here does not mean "non-existence" as it so often does in Indian usage, but deceptiveness,

seductiveness, or inauthenticity. Of all the virtues, humility, non-violence and control of sensual appetites are fundamental to the formation of personal morality according to Chaitanya Vaishnava ethics.

Other virtues may be seen as reinforcing these. For example, Chaitanya Vaishnava accounts of conversions often feature the transformation of an unreformed sinner who is arrogant, violent, addicted to sex, meat and alcohol, into a fledgling devotee who eschews all of this. The traditional reputation of committed and even many nominal Vaishnavas for abstention from alcohol and meat attests to the overall effectiveness of these particular prohibitions and need not be elaborated upon here. The importance of sexual propriety to typical orthodox Chaitanya Vaishnavas, celibate and married [is further proof].[39]

Still, to devotees, there is a clear differentiation between explicitly spiritual areas of concern and those that are more profane. The few explicit endorsements of secular behavior found in Vaishnava texts are general, recommending, for example, that kings rule justly and sensitively; that the wealthy support the poor and pious; and that common folk pay their taxes and move toward peaceful relations with those around them. These same texts only mandatorily promote the propagation of Krishna-bhakti, for all mundane considerations, they say, are served by this one fundamental principle.

Vaishnava scriptures offer several analogies to make this point abundantly clear. For example, it is explained that, by watering the root of a tree, one automatically distributes water to its leaves and branches. The message should be clear: by acting in Krishna Consciousness, one can render the highest service to everyone — namely self, family, society, country, humanity, and so on, for all are like branches, stemming from the root, Lord Sri Krishna. Thus, if Krishna is satisfied by one’s actions, then everyone else will be satisfied as well. This is why, to a Vaishnava, Krishna-bhakti is central, and why mundane morals and ethics are considered secondary.

Secondary concerns, however, are still concerns, and mature Vaishnavas are scrupulously aware of this. For this reason, ISKCON has initiated projects that might appear classifiable as “mundane welfare work,” but a careful look beneath the surface reveals this work as so much more.

For example, we have already mentioned prasadam distribution. But we have not mentioned the length and breadth of this particular initiative. A significant part of prasadam distribution is the “Food for Life” program, an undertaking that feeds and educates literally millions of needy people throughout the world, largely in Third World countries. Hare Krishna Food for Life is the world’s largest vegetarian, non-profit food relief organization, with projects in over 60 countries. Volunteers serve more than 1,500,000 free meals daily in a variety of ways, including food vans serving to the homeless within major cities around the world; lunchtime meals for more than 700,000 poor school children throughout India; and also in response to large natural disasters, such as the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake.

This is all sacred food, offering spiritual benefit to all who partake.

Or consider Gopal’s Garden School in Mumbai. In 2001, the school was started in a rented apartment with only a few nursery students. Today, the devotees have their own building. There are 28 teachers and 170 children attending Gopal’s Garden School, which offers classes from nursery school through to high school diploma. Students receive both spiritual and academic education, all centered in devotion to Krishna.

The Bhaktivedanta Hospital is yet another Vaishnava project that allows devotees to make a dent in the miseries of the material world while promoting Krishna-bhakti. The hospital has over three hundred resident doctors, half of them initiated ISKCON devotees. The healing to one and all is done in his name.

Such projects show that primary and secondary concerns can go hand-in-hand. One can educate people spiritually while helping them materially, or share Krishna Consciousness while showing kindness. The Vaishnava tradition offers the world various “spiritual technologies” by which one can do just that: help the world and help others move beyond the world, live a happy, peaceful life, and go back home, back to Godhead.

Sri Chaitanya's Garden of Devotion

Garden metaphors are not rare. Perhaps the most famous one is found in William Shakespeare's Hamlet, where he narrates the decline of Denmark. He describes, as only he could, the horrible disease and death perpetrated under debauched rule. Ophelia, in the beginning, is a young noblewoman compared to a budding flower, in stark contrast to King Claudius, who is evil and wilted. Under his rule, Denmark loses its light, and in the same way that a garden might dry up and lose all its vitality if left in darkness, without nourishment, so, too, does Claudius's kingdom, causing Ophelia to wilt as well.

Effective though the analogy is, a more profound garden analogy is employed by Krishnadasa Kaviraja Goswami in Seventeenth-century India. In his Chaitanya Charitamrita, Lord Chaitanya and his movement are compared to the tree of devotion, the bhakti-vriksha: "The Lord brought the desire tree of devotional service to this earth and became its gardener. He sowed the seed and sprinkled upon it the water of His will. By His inconceivable powers, Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu Himself became the gardener, the trunk and the branches of the tree of devotional service simultaneously. From the trunk grew many branches and above them innumerable others. Thus the branches of the Chaitanya tree formed a cluster or society, with great branches covering all the universe" (CC Adi, 9.18).

Aside from being more positive and upbeat — no offense to Sir William — Kaviraja Goswami's metaphor surpasses the one in Hamlet in other ways as well. Mainly, it tells us much about the spiritual world and how to pursue spiritual practice, something lacking in Shakespeare's play. This is especially so because Kaviraja Goswami's commentators have thoroughly extended the metaphor, bringing it to ever-increasing levels of richness and understanding.

First of all, they say, devotees, being Mahaprabhu's representative gardeners, naturally tend their creeper of devotion, which strains towards the sunlight of prayojana, or the goal of spiritual practice. Still, despite the devotees' good intentions, if they either neglect the creeper or the weeds that grow around it, the creeper cannot succeed in reaching its desired goal. If the practitioner focuses only on the creeper, giving it water (hearing and chanting), sunlight (sadhana and ritual practices), nutrients (prasadam, spiritual food) and so on, the ignored weeds will flourish and choke the creeper. In the garden of devotion, one needs to identify the weeds that can potentially destroy it. The great teachers in disciplic succession highlight the danger of five weeds in particular, though there are many more:

1) Impersonalism, in other words, in terms of seeing God as an abstract force and by dealing with others as if they are non-entities;
2) Duplicity in both mind and speech;
3) Desire for fame, adoration, or profit;
4) Narrow-mindedness: the inability to see with broad spiritual vision;
5) Thinking oneself superior due to position or belonging to a particular group.

If we are careful in nurturing our devotional garden, mindful of these and other weeds, we begin our journey home, back to Godhead. The great scholar, pure devotee, and bhakti-yogi, Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati Thakura, explains how this gradual journey to perfection takes place:

> Bhakti grows like a creeper from a tiny seed. By becoming a gardener the jiva [the living entity] sows the seed and splashes the seed with nourishing water, in the form of hearing the name of Krishna and chanting the Name. The creeper of bhakti springs to shoot and grows, piercing through this mundane sphere. The growing creeper goes through the stream of Viraja (the unmanifest realm outside this material universe), then goes through the illuminated plane of Brahman (the white light of spiritual bliss), until at last the creeper finally attains for herself a home in the soil of the infinite sphere called Paravyoma. The creeper continues to grow in that Paravyoma atmosphere and reaches the limits of the higher sphere of Goloka-Vrindaban where she climbs and clings to the Purpose-Tree at the Feet of Krishna.[40]

As for branches of this tree in the modern world: Srila Prabhupada says: "Our International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) is one of the branches of the Chaitanya tree." (CC, Adi-lila, 9.18, purport) Therefore, every small group of ISKCON's congregation is a branch of the overarching branch, stemming from Lord Chaitanya's tree of bhakti and able to help people with their personal gardens. Devotees are always interested in branching out, so to speak, for, as Srila Prabhupada said,

"Preaching is the essence." In this way, Lord Chaitanya's garden will engulf the entire world.

Otherwise, in the gardens we now know, there are countless chunks of dirt in need of breaking — so many, in fact, that few gardens have any real chance of surviving. Healthy plants will not take root if soil is too lumpy. Shakespeare knew this well, and he shows us various clumps that need to be broken up, various weeds that need to be excised: deception, distraction, negativity. His plays are replete with them. But he cannot tell us how to do it. While he can identify the problem, he has no idea how to mend the garden. Alas, he was not a spiritual master.

Srila Prabhupada, following in the yogic tradition of Kaviraja Goswami, has outlined a methodical system that can take practitioners back to the spiritual world. The creeper of devotion can again become healthy by the procedures outlined in Srila Prabhupada's books. Anyone can begin by reading these books and chanting Hare Krishna. For one who does so, spiritual life blossoms like never before. According to the yogic philosophy of Krishna Consciousness, each flower has value and can be nurtured by the process of devotion. We need simply avail ourselves to the process and allow Krishna to do the rest.

Part III: Gods and Goddesses

Of Idols and Deities: Coming to Grips with a Misunderstood Form of Worship

For devotees, yogis, Hindus, and friends of the Hare Krishna movement, the worship of Deities (i.e., visible images of Krishna, God, His Incarnations and divine associates, made of material elements such as stone, marble, metal, and so on) is a natural and joyful phenomenon. The "statue-like" form of Krishna is an accessible way to relate to the Lord of the Universe, who, in general, is beyond the purview of our material senses.

Sometimes, people who enter East-Indian temples are at first taken aback. "Is this Deity 'a graven image,' the kind that is frowned upon in the Bible?" They might see the Deity as both disturbing and sublime: disturbing because they know that God is not a material object; a statue might represent Him, but could never be Him. This is simple logic and clearly delineated in the religious scriptures of the West (and in the East as well), which tell us not to worship such images, or idols.

And yet those who see the Deity generally find the beauty of His form, the elegance of His dress, and the enthusiasm with which He is worshiped as fundamentally alluring; it is sublime in the most direct sense of the word.

Is Deity worship different than idol worship? Just what does Deity worship mean? In what sense can this visible form be God? Why would rational people worship a material object as if it were divine? And where does this form of worship originate? These are the questions we will address in this article.

Vaishnavism, the religious tradition best represented in the West by the Hare Krishna movement, views God as having both transcendental and immanent aspects. The Lord exists in His spiritual abode (transcendence) and is likewise present in the hearts of all individuals (immanence). Another aspect of God's immanence are His incarnations. In the form of multifarious avataras (literally, "descents"), He appears in the world of three dimensions, and the Vedic scriptures give much information about such appearances.

Still another form of God's immanence, and one that is unique to Vaishnavism, is the form of the Deity (Sanskrit: murti). God becomes manifest not only in incarnations but in images. Thus, Vaishnavism sees the Deity as the "iconic incarnation" of the Lord. One might argue that an unlimited God cannot be confined to material elements. To this, it can be countered that God can do whatever He likes, and to deny Him the ability to manifest in material elements — even though they are temporary and limited — is to deny His omnipotence.

Even so, much of the Western world will necessarily misunderstand Deity worship, viewing worshippers of "idols" as people who merely bow down to imagined gods. But the problem is this: those who are inclined to such worship see themselves quite differently, and that needs to be appreciated, too. No one identifies oneself as an idol-worshipper. In the end, "idolatry" is an outsider's term — not something anyone would call themselves. Such "idol worship," to those who engage in it, is merely another instance of seeing God everywhere, and especially in a specifically delineated form, authorized by scriptures and sages.

The Vedic literature itself maintains a sharp distinction between idol and deity. As Harvard scholar Diana Eck has written in Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India:

> Just as the term icon conveys the sense of a "likeness," so do the Sanskrit words pratikriti and pratima suggest the "likeness" of the image to the deity it represents. The common word for such images, however, is murti, which is defined in Sanskrit as "anything which has definite shape and limits," "a form, body, figure," "an embodiment, incarnation, manifestation." Thus, the murti is more than a likeness; it is the deity itself taken "form." … The uses of the word murti in the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita suggest that the form is its essence. The flame is the murti of fire, [etc.]...[41]

The Deity is thus more than a likeness but is God Himself. To explain how this is possible, His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada explains Krishna's all-pervading nature in relation to Deity worship:

> …the Lord in His archa-murti, or form made of material elements, is not material, for those elements, although separated from the Lord, are also a part of the Lord's energy, as stated in Bhagavad Gita. Because the elements are the Lord's own energy and because there is no difference between the energy and the energetic, the Lord can appear through any element. Just as the sun can act through the sunshine and thus distribute its heat and light, so Krishna, by His inconceivable power, can appear in His

> original spiritual form in any material element, including stone, wood, paint, gold, silver, and jewels…[42]

The list of material elements Prabhupada furnishes here is taken from the Srimad Bhagavatam (11.27.12): "The Deity form of the Lord is said to appear in eight varieties: stone, wood, metal, earth, paint, sand, the mind, or jewels." Scriptures such as the Bhagavatam give elaborate details on how such elements are transformed into divine substance, i.e., how their original spiritual nature is brought out. These scriptures also explain the theology behind the Deity, and minutiae connected to its worship.

The Sanskrit texts called Shilpa-shastras give exact instructions for the fashioning of Deities. There are specifications for the proper stance of the deities, their hand gestures, bodily proportions, and so on, so that the "image" is not merely a function of the "imagination" of the artist. Trained in scriptural specifications for divine forms, the shilpins (as the artists who create the images are called) enter into moods of deep yogic meditation, thus fashioning images not in accordance with fancy but in accordance with scriptural canon. After this, an elaborate ceremony, known as Prana-pratishta, is enacted, and through this, the Divine Lord is called upon to animate the material elements that are sculpted in His form. When the Deity is ready to be worshipped and is placed in the temple, worshippers can come and have darshan ("seeing") — they see the Deity and the Deity sees them.

Vaishnavas basically view the Deity in two ways. Primarily, the image is seen as an embodiment of the divine. The figure is infused with the presence of God. This makes it not simply a statue, but the "abode" of the Lord, no different from His essential nature.

Secondarily, the image is a focal point for concentration. As Eck says, "the image is a kind of yantra, literally a 'device' for harnessing the eye and the mind so that the one-pointedness of thought (ekagrata), which is fundamental to meditation, can be attained."

Ultimately, the image incarnation of the Lord is a divine "descent" by which the Lord entrusts Himself to human caretaking. The Deity is a divine guest and He must be treated as such. Therefore, He is offered incense, flowers, lights, hymns, and food. All of this is pleasing not only to the devotee's senses, but also to the Deity's. Moreover, this interaction establishes a loving exchange between devotee and God.

"[Vaishnava] worship," Eck writes, "...is certainly not an occasion for yogic withdrawing of the senses...but it is rather an occasion for awakening the senses and directing them toward the divine. Entering the temple, a worshipper clangs a big overhead bell. The energy of the senses is harnessed to the apprehension of God. Thus, it is not only vision that is refined by darshan, but the other senses as well are focused, ever more sharply, on God."[43]

As Eck says, "The image, which may be seen, bathed, adorned, touched, and honored does not stand between the worshipper and the Lord, somehow receiving the honor properly due to the Supreme Lord. Rather, because the image is a form of the Supreme Lord, it is precisely the image that facilitates and enhances the close relationship of the worshipper and God and makes possible the deepest outpouring of emotions in worship."[44]

It may be said that God's willingness to incarnate in Deity form constitutes the ultimate expression of His love for humanity. This was beautifully expressed by Pillai Lokacharya, a great teacher in the Ramanujite tradition of Vaishnavism:

> This is the greatest grace of the Lord, that being free He becomes bound, being independent He becomes dependent for all His service on the devotee... In other forms, man belonged to God. But behold the supreme sacrifice of Ishvara [Krishna] in the form of the murti, for here the almighty becomes the property of the devotee... He carries the Lord about, fans Him, feeds Him, plays with Him — indeed, the Infinite has become finite, that the child soul may grasp, understand, and love Him.[45]

Thus, when contemplating the form of Krishna or other related Deities of the Vaishnava tradition, one can understand that there is more here than meets the eye.

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Deconstructing Hari: The Creation of the Universe and the Origins of Disciplic Succession

Recently, I passed a theater which was showing the Woody Allen film, Deconstructing Harry. While I am certain the Woody Allen movie has little to do with theology, another name for Krishna is Hari, which, of course, is reminiscent of the name Harry. And to understand Krishna's place in creation and the beginning of the disciplic succession, some "deconstructing" is certainly in order.

As a friend to various scholars who teach Hinduism and the culture of South Asia, I am sometimes asked to sit in as a guest lecturer, to tell undergraduates about my experiences in India, and about my work as an author and the traditions of the East. When such an opportunity arises, I am always quick to explain the differences between sectarian religion, such as Hinduism, and Vaishnavism, which represents the philosophia perennis, or the abiding truth underlying all religious traditions. In India, this truth is called sanatana dharma, or the eternal function of the soul, and it stands quite a distance from contemporary Hinduism.

Invariably, I am asked how the Hare Krishna movement originated, and this in turn leads to a discussion about the creation of the universe and the beginning of religion as we know it today. Why would a question about the genesis of a modern-day movement evolve into a discussion of primal origins? Consider my usual response to a student who wants to know where the movement began: "If I had to pick a point in time when the movement originated, I would say that it comes into being with chatur-mukhi Brahma, or the four-headed engineer of the universe, the first created entity, at the dawn of creation." Does that clear things up? Not necessarily.

Naturally, since most people are unaware of the eternal nature of Krishna Consciousness, and, due to lack of knowledge, equate it with Hinduism, I begin by explaining how the origins of Hinduism are shrouded in mystery, and that its roots are found in sanatana dharma. I explain that, unlike the other world religions, Hinduism cannot be traced to a single founder, and that it is in fact a medley of different religious traditions, with Vaishnavism at its core. I then explain what Vaishnavism is: the worship of the Supreme Lord Vishnu, in any of His diverse manifestations, including Krishna, His original manifestation. This truth is at the heart of sanatana dharma and was revealed to the first created being, Brahma.

When Brahma first appeared, I tell them, he brought with him Vedic knowledge. Lord Vishnu, God, the original creator, gave Brahma glimpses of reality, of the spiritual world, and information on how to live in this world, and this was handed down, from teacher to student, in an esoteric lineage. I let them know that, in a sense, I am now allowing them entrance into this esoteric tradition. This is how parampara, or disciplic succession, works: I learned these truths from Srila Prabhupada, who learned from his teacher, on back to Brahma, and, today, the students are being introduced to it by me.

But all of this has a long history, and by this point, the students want to know more. To keep everything "scholarly," that is, "conveyed according to contemporary academic methods," I explain what little the world knows about "Hindu" origins: in the 1920s, the remains of an ancient civilization in the Indus Valley was discovered in the heart of India. The ancient ruins share a unique position with Mesopotamia, China, and Egypt as one of the four earliest civilizations known to man. Some say it existed from 3,000 BCE to 1,800 BCE, but has roots extending further into antiquity, perhaps as far back as 7,000 BCE. In its heyday, to hear modern historians tell it, the Indus Valley was surprisingly advanced, with planned cities, agriculture, writing, architecture, and so on. Her first excavated sites were on the Indus River, in the northwest of the Indian subcontinent, which explains how the civilization received its current name — Indus became a name for all of India. At its height, which scholars say came in roughly 2,000 BCE, the Indus civilization boasted an area that was larger than Europe.

And yet, what do we really know about it? Actually — and here I labor to let the students down gently — we know very little. The most promising find includes an ancient form of script, but it is totally indecipherable. Theories, of course, are put forward regularly: some say the script is a form of early Aryan (Indo-Iranian or Indo-European). Others propose that it is part of a family of languages spoken largely in central and eastern India (and Bangladesh). Still others, in what is perhaps the most popular of all such theories, say it is from the Dravidian family of languages, from South India. But no one really knows. The imagination runs wild over the possibilities, and everyone hopes that it can one day be fully deciphered. For now, we merely have an abundance of artifacts, and fragments of a

nearly forgotten culture. Add to this the now seriously questionable Aryan Invasion Theory,[46] which asserts that the Indus Valley was intruded upon by outside invaders sometime in the second millennium BCE, and it becomes clear that the world of scholarship has offered precious little in the way of Hindu origins.

Given this lacuna of information, I tell the students, it becomes all the more important to see what the tradition says about itself. The subject of Krishna's role in creation is complicated, for He is totally Other and unremittingly transcendent. He revels in pastimes of love in His original kingdom, in the spiritual world, which has nothing to do with this material creation. Still, God so loves His rebellious parts and parcels — you and I — that he accommodates our deviant desire. Since we want to usurp His position, becoming imitation lords, of sorts, He gives us terrain in which to indulge our dreamlike fantasy. Since it is borne of an illusory desire, it cannot take place in the spiritual world, where all facets of existence partake of supreme reality. Instead, He creates the material world, so we can play out our imaginary roles, until we realize that these multifaceted roles are just that: imaginary.

And yet, it is not Krishna directly who creates, for, as I already mentioned, He is engaged in eternal pastimes of love. In addition, God is changeless, and so the fluctuations of the material world — creation and destruction — cannot affect His internal, essential nature. Rather, for this purpose, He expands into numerous manifestations and incarnations, and so this is where our project of deconstruction must take place.

The Sanskrit term svayam rupa refers to Krishna in His original form. Actually, this original form can be divided into two: svayam rupa and svayam prakash. There is only subtle difference between these two, but it is the latter form that further expands into incarnations and manifestations in the material world. The former exists solely in the spiritual world.

Once expanded for the purposes of creation, these svayam prakash forms are called tad ekatma forms. These are self-same manifestations of Krishna, resembling the svayam rupa, but there are some differences in "bodily" features — that is to say, in terms of visual appearance, since God doesn't have a material body — and it is these manifestations who serve His purposes in the material world. In other words, these forms expand for His purposes of creation, which is our proposed theme.

Each of these categories can be further divided into prabhava prakash (pastime manifestation forms), prabhava vilasa (pastime extension forms), vaibhava prakash (emotional manifestation forms) and vaibhava vilasa (emotional extension forms). This certainly needs deconstruction, if it is to be properly understood.

In the Vaishnava scriptures, Krishna first expands as Balarama, who appears in narrative pastimes as His brother. It is Balarama who incarnates as the three purusha-avataras, namely the Maha-Vishnu (or Karanodakashayi) avatara, the Garbhodakashayi avatara and the Kshirodakashayi avatara. These are the tad ekatma forms for the purpose of creation. This is explained in the scriptures as follows: "For material creation, Lord Krishna's plenary expansion assumes three Vishnu forms. The first one, Maha-Vishnu, creates the total material energy, known as mahat-tattva. The second, Garbhodakashayi Vishnu, enters into all the universes to create diversity in each of them. The third, Kshirodakashayi Vishnu, is diffused as the all-pervading Supersoul in all the universes, and is known as Paramatma. He is present even within the atoms. Anyone who knows these three Vishnus can be liberated from material entanglement."[47] This brings us to the act of creation itself.

In the beginning, we learn, before time and space, there was only Maha-Vishnu, the primordial Being, fabulously majestic with four arms, long, raven black hair, and an exquisitely beautiful dark hue. He existed alone, but with a purpose. From his kingly terrain in the never-ending spiritual world, he created a cloud in the sky. In its shade, he created a great ocean. The water of that ocean is transcendental: liquid spirituality. It is from here, say Vaishnava texts, that the material world came into being. It is therefore called "the waters of creation." In the coolness of these very waters, Vishnu lay down to sleep. While in this restful condition, submerged in the water, he began to breathe deeply and steadily, and with them, time itself comes into being. Aeons pass. Then, as he continues breathing, bubble-like universes emanate from his divine body, waiting in their turn to become innumerable worlds.

As these transcendent bubbles float away from him, they are not divorced from his essential being. Rather, he expands into numerous secondary Vishnu forms, almost identical to his original, sleeping form, and enters into each of them. In each universe, with the basic elements of matter present in some preliminary form, he reclines on the coils of a thousand-hooded serpent, Shesha by name, who gently rocks him back and forth, anticipating his primary act of creation. To accomplish this end, Vishnu

emits from his navel a magnificent lotus that grows and blossoms into a whorl with a thousand petals. Atop that whorl, Brahma, the first created being, makes his appearance into the world of three dimensions. He is Vishnu's first offspring, chosen to create all the rest.

Brahma was born as an adult. Coming to consciousness, he saw only darkness. The Sun had not yet been created, nor the Moon. There was no one and nothing around him. He looked in all directions with such intensity, that four heads suddenly appeared in place of his one. But even with this increased capacity, he saw nothing, and could not understand the rather empty world around him, or his purpose in it.

He decided to climb down the lotus stem, hoping to solve the mystery of his origin. As he cautiously moved down the newly created stalk, he saw the chaos of the nascent creation around himself, consisting of the stuff of unmade worlds. He began to intuit his reason for being: he is meant to create. But he did not know how to go about it. He prayed for some indication of how to proceed. Frustrated, with little more than a vague sense of what he had to do, he turned and began his long journey back up the lotus stem.

Suddenly, in answer to his prayer, he heard two syllables: "Ta-pa." Listening intently, he heard them again, and his course became clearer. The word refers to penance. He understood by this that the Lord was giving him a message: to serve Vishnu in such a vital way by assisting in creation would require that he qualify himself by deep meditation, and by developing a profound sense of austerity. Now fully ensconced in his high lotus cradle, he sat with legs folded in yogic posture, back erect, and meditating on the task ahead.

After one thousand celestial years (many more years in our reckoning), Brahma ended his meditation, knowing what he had to do and how to do it. His deep concentration had given him a vision of the spiritual world, where his beloved Vishnu resides. For Brahma, the borders of the material and spiritual worlds melted away, and he could see reality in all its beauty. Overwhelmed by the Lord's form, nature and brilliance, and by the world He inhabits, Brahma composed hundreds of verses, which were later compiled in a book known as the Brahma-samhita. Then, regaining composure, he turned his attention to the mission at hand. From his mind issued forth progeny, and from them an impressive array of species to fill the universe.

Brahma also sired sons, including his favorite, Narada. Brahma explained the nature of the spiritual realm to him, and asked him to share this with the multitudes who now populated the world. More aeons passed. Narada then knew his greatest success when he conveyed the message to Vyasa, who put Vedic truths in written form, compiling knowledge that had been only been passed down orally for millennia. Vyasa took the one, original Veda and divided it into four, and then edited them for ease of understanding. Further, he compiled the Mahabharata and the Puranas, to give the essence of Vedic truth, which was more obscure in the earlier scriptures. He entrusted each of these to scholars of impeccable character, and they in turn taught the texts to their disciples and grand-disciples. Thus, the respective schools of Vedic thought were established. These, of course, eventually gave rise to Hinduism as we know it today.

It is still in the esoteric lineages, however, that the essential core of Vedic truth is passed down. The succession from Brahma to Narada to Vyasa, on down to Srila Prabhupada, the founder-acharya of the Hare Krishna movement, is one such lineage. Shiva, the demigod who is responsible for the eventual destruction of the universe, is also the founder of an early lineage, known as the Rudra sampradaya. Lakshmi, the goddess of Fortune and the wife of Vishnu, founded yet another. And the Four Kumaras, saintly personalities from the distant past, began yet another. These four lines of disciplic descent were systematized by Madhvacharya, Vishnu Swami, Ramanuja, and Nimbarka, respectively, the best of the great teacher-saints from Medieval India. In India today — and, by the grace of Srila Prabhupada, throughout the world — those who know the ancient traditions well do not learn about Vedic knowledge from schoolbooks or from stories passed down by their grandmothers. Rather, if one is serious about the spiritual pursuit, one approaches a teacher in disciplic succession and studies under him in earnest. Nor is it simply about study, but about living one's life in such a way that truth opens up, like Brahma's lotus in the beginning of creation.

The students now sense that I am not exactly in line with their teachers at the university, that there is something else at work here. "Yes," I say, "religious truth cannot be understood by mere intellectuality or cerebral word games. You cannot learn this by mastering Sanskrit or getting a Ph.D. These things are laudable, and might even be helpful along the way — for some. But the real thing is a sincere heart: being willing to submit to a spiritual teacher, with a sense of reverence and a service attitude. To learn from someone who knows, not merely one who has studied books, but one who

knows. To enter into the truths of transcendence, one must be willing, like Brahma, to see beyond the darkness through submission to the Lord. We cannot meditate for a thousand celestial years, as Brahma did. But if we can cry out to God once, with full sincerity, we can achieve what Brahma achieved: knowledge of who we are and what we are meant to do. This is why, in the Hare Krishna movement, we emphasize the chanting of the maha-mantra: Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare/ Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare, for here we beseech the Lord to kindly let us serve Him: "O Lord. O energy of the Lord. Please engage me in Your holy service." In the beginning was the Word, I tell them, and to end our sojourn in the material world, the Word plays a role, too.

I end by explaining that there is much we can learn from the Brahma story. In addition to telling us something about cosmic creation, the story provides a metaphor for man's spiritual sojourn. Like Brahma, we are connected to our past through an umbilical cord, the lotus stem of our genetic background. In addition, we are born in ignorance, the darkness of Brahma's yet uncreated worlds. Like him, we must determinedly question our identity and purpose. And when we hear the call of the Lord, we must be willing to meditate and to perform austerities, and to do whatever it takes to reach our goal. If we do so, we are then part of the Brahma lineage. As a finale, I give them the clincher: though this creation story about Vishnu and Brahma appears supernatural, it gives us a sense of primal origins, about the otherworldly existence beyond the material sphere. And if we consider the undeciphered script of the Indus Valley and the innumerable historical questions surrounding the origins of Vedic civilization which may never be answered, it is likely that this will remain the most convincing story of them all.

This, then, is my brief deconstruction of Hari, as He exists as Lord of creation. I am m certain it is not what the Wood Meister had in mind, but his field is not the Absolute truth, is it? His field is comedy. So, please keep in mind the source. Keep in mind God, the creator. Without Him, there would be no Woody, nor comedy. Indeed, there would be no world.

“He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands,” or, What’s with All the Arms?

Addressing a roomful of college students can be challenging, especially when unexpected questions suddenly seize the room. For example, during a recent lecture on the life and times of Lord Chaitanya, one student raised his hand and asked, “What’s with all the arms?”

At first, I had no idea what he was talking about, but then he clarified: “Although you didn’t mention it in this particular class, I’ve heard you talk about Vishnu’s four arms, a ten-armed Kali deity, and a thousand-armed man-lion. What gives?”

I started to think back to my own introduction to Krishna Consciousness, and how I, too, initially thought it strange that God, or even His various representatives on heavenly planets, was depicted with numerous arms. “The better to embrace you with,” I answered, hoping to buy some time.

The class laughed, but they obviously wanted more. So I decided to put a more philosophical spin on it, one I knew they would appreciate, given their focus on the history of ideas: “The Greek philosopher Xenophanes,” I reminded them, “spoke of religion’s deities as a form of projection. He said that the reason we envision God in human terms is because we are human. Had we been plants or animals, and if we were able to think deeply about the nature of God while living in such bodies, we would likely envision Him as a plant or as an animal.”

“The Vedic conception can’t be accused of that,” I continued. “Here we find manifestations of the divine in all species of life — as a boar, as a fish, as a tortoise, as a man-lion. So Vedic conceptions of God are not simply a projection of our own form. Thus, we can counter Xenophanes as follows: the Vedic conception of God is not man-made, for it’s a conception that is not constricted or defined by the human form.” And then I connected it for them: “An extension of this is found in the multiplicity of arms — the Vedic conception of the Deity is not limited to our usual two-armed form.”

They liked it. Hands flew into the air, accompanied by smiles of appreciation. Their many flailing arms reminded me of the subject under discussion.

“Do the numerous arms represent something specific?” “Do all deities have manifestations with many arms?” “Who is your favorite multi-armed divinity?”

“Wait. Slow down,” I said with a chuckle, inspired by their enthusiasm. “Let’s take this one-by-one.

“Usually,” I began, “each hand holds some object that symbolizes or represents the various qualities of that particular deity. Sometimes their hands are empty, but the position of the fingers and the palms signify their character. For example, if the fingers are pointing toward the ground, it means that this particular divinity is of a charitable disposition, or, if they point upwards, it means this deity is a manifestation of God as protector. These gestures, also known as mudras, indicate their individual powers and differentiate one from the other.

“Now, I can talk about Vishnu, the Supreme Deity, more than I can the other, lesser divine beings mentioned in Vedic texts, like Brahma or Shiva. This is because Vishnu is the deity my spiritual mentor specifically focused on. So let me begin like this: the four hands of Vishnu express dominion over the four directions of space, harkening back to what His name actually means: ‘the all-pervading one.’

“The arms also symbolize the four aims of human life (purusarthas), which are: (a) duty and virtue (dharma); (b) the pursuit of material goods, wealth, and success (artha); (c) pleasure, sexuality, and sense enjoyment (kama); and (d) liberation (moksha), the chief form of which is not simply going to heaven but developing love for God. This is the real goal of human life.

“Most importantly, Lord Vishnu holds implements in his hands: a conch shell, a discus (chakra), a lotus, and a mace. The conch symbolizes creativity and victory; a chakra (or discus), the powers of the mind — it is also a weapon with which he not only kills demons but slays misconception and doubt; a large mace, with which he evokes the fear of the unrighteous — it is also a symbol of strength; and a lotus, which represents liberation and the ability to rise beyond the material world.”

I then told the students that Vishnu has unlimited forms and that these forms are distinguished by the above implements, and also by which hands and by which combinations of those hands these implements are held. In his Teachings of Lord Chaitanya, Srila Prabhupada quotes the Siddhartha-samhita and its description of twenty-four forms of Vishnu. These forms are distinguished, says Srila Prabhupada, by the “symbolic representations” in their four hands. He goes on to quote other sacred

texts, such as the Hayasirsa-pancharatra, which lists yet other manifestations of Vishnu, all distinguished and categorized according to which of the implements appear in which of their hands.

This still left open their question about my favorite multiple-armed form of God. Though it might seem a bit odd, I do not cherish a thousand-armed Vishnu, or Krishna's Universal Form, or a ten-armed Narashimhadeva. Rather, I always had a special appreciation for Lord Chaitanya's six-armed form. In fact, I collect paintings of this particular image, and its meaning and manifestation continues to intrigue me.

I remember my initial reading of Prabhupada's description of this form: "Sad-bhuja, the six-armed Lord Gaurasundara [Chaitanya], is a representation of three incarnations. The form of Sri Ramachandra is symbolized by a bow in one hand and an arrow in another, the form of Lord Sri Krishna is symbolized by a stick and a flute like those generally held by a cowherd boy, and Lord Chaitanya Mahaprabhu is symbolized by a sannyasa-danda and a kamandalu, or water pot."[48]

"Wow," I thought, "all the most important incarnations of Krishna in one form!" I loved it! As I learned more, I noticed that Prabhupada also saw this form as special:

> Lord Sri Ramachandra is so kind and merciful to His devotees that He is very easily satisfied by a little service rendered by anyone, human or not. This is the special advantage of worshiping Lord Ramachandra, and there is the same advantage in worshipping Lord Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. Lord Krishna and Lord Ramachandra, in the manner of kshatriyas, sometimes showed Their mercy by killing asuras [demons], but Lord Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu awarded love of God without difficulty even to the asuras. All the incarnations of the Supreme Personality of Godhead — but especially Lord Ramachandra, Lord Krishna and, later, Lord Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu — delivered many of the living entities present before Them, indeed almost all of them. Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu is therefore represented in the six-armed form of sad-bhuja-murti, which is a combination of Lord Ramachandra, Lord Krishna and Lord Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. The best purpose of human life can be fulfilled by worshipping the sad-bhuja-murti, the form of the Lord with six arms — two arms of Ramachandra, two arms of Krishna and two arms of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu.[49]

I also conducted some research myself, finding that the earliest artistic depiction of this particular form seems to be in the Oriyan style, and it is painted on the walls of the Jagannath temple, as well as in the Gangamata Math, in Jagannath Puri in Orissa, India.

On the southeastern side of the main temple building in Puri, one can also see a deity of Lord Chaitanya in his six-armed form. This is because Mahaprabhu revealed this form to both King Prataparudra and to his court pandit (priest), Sarvabhauma Bhattacharya, both of whom resided in Puri. Thus, the King had this form painted on the outside of the temple tower and on the ceiling of the Nat Mandir, as well as in a room near the southern gate. The form was also famously shown to Lord Chaitanya's intimate associate Nityananda Prabhu, as described in Chaitanya Charitamrita (Adi 17.13). Over the centuries, many artists have depicted this deity, but my favorite depictions are the ones that have appeared in Back to Godhead.

To conclude, I attempted to instill the most important lesson of all into the students: "The bottom line, of course, is that God can have innumerable hands, one hand, or no hands." This was how I ended that class. The Vedic literature is complete with numerous descriptions of God's many forms and, yes, hands. But the important part of them is not his hands. Rather, it is about His heart, His love. While His hands may exist in an infinite variety of forms, with diverse symbolism and attributes based on His purpose and meaning, His heart is one. His love for us is single-minded. That is certain. And yet, like the old song says, "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands." This was a spiritual that made it to Number One on the popular song charts in 1958 when sung by Laurie London. It was on the Most Played by Jockeys song list in America that year and, given its Vedic backing, we need not wonder why.

Krishna's Birth: Is Krishna "Born" in the Same Way That We Are Born?

In the Bhagavad Gita (4.9), Lord Krishna says, "One who knows the transcendental nature of My appearance and activities does not, upon leaving the body, take his birth again in this material world, but attains My eternal abode, O Arjuna."

While this verse alludes to God's "birth" in the material world, we actually learn much more about this birth three verses earlier: "Although I am unborn and My transcendental body never deteriorates, and although I am the Lord of all living entities, I still appear in every millennium in My original transcendental form." And why does He take birth? Text 8 of the same chapter tells us that he comes "to deliver the pious and to annihilate the miscreants." He also comes to "reestablish the principles of religion," which often get lost as time goes on.

This tells us much about Krishna. First of all, He is never really "born," He is "unborn." But He does appear in our world. He descends regularly, in fact. His body is not like ours. We have bodies that eventually fall apart, but Krishna comes in His original, transcendental form. It is visible, but it is totally spiritual. The verse also tells us that He is the Supreme Lord, and it further implies that He has subsidiary forms, though His form as Krishna is His original one.

In these Gita verses, Krishna talks about His birth and about our birth as well. He uses the Sanskrit word janma, which literally means "birth," for both events. However, He makes a clear distinction: we ordinary living beings are forced to take birth based on our desire and karma, or causal actions. Over the course of many births and deaths, the soul of each one of us takes on numerous bodies to work out our desires and to receive our just deserts, until we become purified and return to the spiritual world. Krishna, on the other hand, is "born" according to His own, sweet will. He comes here only to help us return to Him, to allure us with His beautiful lila, or pastimes. And He also comes to kill especially notorious demons. His devotees take pleasure in this.

One needs to understand Krishna's appearance in this way. It is not about understanding the historical phenomenon of just when He was born, or where — geographically in India, or elsewhere. Along these lines, I have been noticing the accomplishments of Arun K. Bansal, a preeminent forerunner with regard to computer astrology in India. He says that Krishna, the Supreme Lord, appeared in this world on July 21, 3228 BCE. This is not a "give or take" date, mind you — to him, this is the exact time of the Lord's appearance. Bansal's conclusion is calculated from two of his software packages: the Leo Gold and the Palm computer programs, both designed to simulate the configurations of the stars and planets — those that have occurred, and those that have yet to occur.

According to scriptural tradition, Krishna was born in the month of Bhadrapada (August-September), on the eighth day of the waning moon at midnight. For those of us in the West, this tells us little. Bansal assures his readers that this date is accurate, however, and his evidence is based on the time of Krishna's departure, or His leaving this planet, which he says occurred at 2 PM on February 18, 3102 BCE. This date is crucial in his assessment of Krishna's birth. By working backwards, he arrives at Krishna's birthday.

Bansal quotes the Srimad Bhagavatam and the Vishnu Purana extensively, claiming that "a shloka in the 38th chapter of the Shri Vishnu Puran says that Kali-yuga started on the day Krishna [left this world]." He adds to this another verse from the Srimad Bhagavatam, wherein Lord Brahma himself speaks of Krishna's chronological age: "Brahma says that 125 years have passed since Krishna's birth; this is just before Krishna plans his [departure]."[50]

This information is augmented by the following: the advent of Kali-yuga is traditionally taken to be 3102 BCE, and it is known that Krishna departed this world just before Kali-yuga began. Thus, by subtracting the length of Krishna's manifest pastimes (i.e., 125 years) from the accepted onset date of Kali (i.e., 3102 BCE), Bansal was able to calculate the time of Krishna's birth. With this basic information, he relied on his software to do the rest.

But even if Bansal is correct — and there's no reason to assume that he isn't — what does this really tell us about Krishna? As we learned from the Gita, Krishna is essentially a timeless entity — God — and His purpose in this world is served by giving pleasure to the devotees and by doing away with the demons. This is true whether He appeared 5,000 years ago, or 50 years ago. The highest yoga process, or system of religion, is to assist Krishna in that mission. Great devotees throughout history have told us how to proceed. Briefly, Krishna comes to this world to show us His wondrous

activities, and so that devotees can help Him accomplish this end by sharing those wondrous activities with others. We can talk to our family and friends about Krishna, write or read books about Him, and so on. Of course, before we can share Him with others, we have to know Him ourselves. This is why books like the Bhagavad Gita are so important.

The other thing Krishna seeks to accomplish is to do away with the demonic mentality. Again, we can assist Him by, first of all, doing away with our own demonic disposition. We can purify ourselves by certain basic practices, like chanting His names. There are no sectarian considerations here: Allah, Jehovah, Krishna, El, and so on. It is really limitless. Just chant His names, whatever your religious tradition. We can also follow a certain religious regimen, such as vegetarianism, continence, honesty, sobriety, and so on, just to situate ourselves in goodness. This way, once we are purified, we can help purify others. This will kill the demonic mentality so prevalent in our modern world. It will benefit us, and it will benefit all who come into contact with us. This is Krishna Consciousness, and it is the secret of Lord Krishna's appearance in this world.

“Partial Arts”: Krishna and the Killing of Demons

“Where does Freddy get that from?” The question came as something of a surprise. My little cousin, Freddy, has a temper, an occasional tendency to throw tantrums, and a neighbor was wondering what caused it. He’s now twelve years old, and Carol, their neighbor, thought that he should have outgrown these by now. I chimed in: “You know, God Himself has a violent and destructive side, too.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you’ve got religious war, though most of those are fought for economic and political reasons rather than spiritual ones. And you’ve got a consistent mortality rate — no one dies without the sanction of God. So His hand can be seen in the form of time, which destroys all.”

“That’s a pretty dismal picture.”

“Yes, but if you look at it philosophically, we wouldn’t have that aggressive, violent quality if it wasn’t first there in God. After all, we’re made in His image, and so everything we see in this world must have some prototype in the spiritual realm.”

“That’s pretty deep, but I’m still not sure . . .”

“I’ll tell you something else, too. In the ancient Vaishnava scriptures of India, you’ll find that God Himself enjoys both chivalrous pastimes of love and the thrill of adversarial contact. In both of these, He enjoys battle and engages in acts of destruction. That’s why it’s there in us.”

“Really?” I had her interest.

“Yes, Krishna, as God is called in early Vaishnava texts, engages in pastimes of chivalry, as, for example, when he saves one of His female devotees, Draupadi, from being disrobed by an assembly of evil men. Or the demons — He kills many demons. When He came to earth, some 5,000 years ago, the world was overrun by a demoniac element.”

“So what did He do?”

“Well, to save us from certain devastation, He did away with these miscreants, and in so doing showed us His greatness. Krishna has been glorified ever since, in song, dance, drama, art.

"And there is much we can learn from His killing of demons. In addition to saving us from the hands of those who would do us harm, Krishna's destruction of demons, when studied closely, prepares us for weeding out unwanted bad habits, the kind that obstruct our spiritual vision."

"Oh, now that's interesting."

"Yes." I went on to explain to Bhaktivinoda Thakura, a great Nineteenth-century Vaishnava master, wrote in his Sri Chaitanya Shikshamrta:

> The devotee who worships the holy name should first petition the Lord for the strength to cast out all these unfavorable tendencies and should pray thus before Lord Hari [Krishna] on a daily basis. By doing this regularly, the devotee's heart will eventually become purified. Sri Krishna has killed a number of demons, which may arise in the kingdom of the heart. In order to destroy these problems, a devotee must cry very humbly before the Lord and admit defeat. Then the Lord will nullify all contaminations.

Bhaktivinoda Thakura then gives the following analysis of Krishna's pastimes in relation to impediments on the spiritual path. Here, too, we are briefly introduced to several of the demoniac characters who battled with Krishna some 5,000 years ago:

> Putana [the witch] represents the pseudo-guru, who must be avoided at all costs. Sakatasura [the cart demon] represents carrying the burden of a cartload of ongoing bad habits, as well as lethargy and vanity. Trinavarta [the whirlwind demon] represents false pride, which comes from material scholarship and leads to the adoption to bogus philosophies. Deliverance of Nalakuvara and Manigriva [breaking the twin arjuna trees] represents arrogance and pridefulness, which comes from puffed-up prestige and is rooted in a madness for wealth. Vatsasura [the calf demon] represents a childish mentality that gives rise to a type of greediness resulting in wicked mischievousness.
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> Bakasura [the stork demon] represents cunning duplicity and deceptive behavior. Aghasura [the snake demon] represents cruelty and violence. The Brahma-vimohana pastime [Lord Brahma steals the cowherd boys and calves] represents mundane activities and speculative scholasticism. Dhenukasura [the ass demon] represents gross materialistic intelligence, ignorance of spiritual knowledge. The Kaliya serpent represents brutality and treachery. Krishna's pastime of extinguishing the forest fire represents inter-communal discord among Vaishnavas. Pralambasura represents lusty inclinations and desire for personal gain and honor. The second forest fire represents disturbance of religious principles and interference with religious people by those who are atheistic.
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> The pastime of the Brahmins performing sacrifice represents indifference toward Krishna caused by pride because of one's status or caste in Varnashrama society. Overcoming the pride of Indra represents demigod worship and the tendency to think, "I am Supreme." The pastime of Nanda Maharaja being captured by Varuna represents thinking that spiritual life can be enhanced by intoxication. The pastime of Nanda Maharaja being swallowed by Vidyadhara [the snake] represents rescuing the truth of Krishna Consciousness from being swallowed by impersonalist philosophers.
>
> The conch shell demon and getting the jewel that was stolen by him represent acquiring name and fame and desire for sensuous enjoyment under the plea of devotion. Aristasura [the bull demon] represents pride arising from indulging in false religions that were created by cheaters. This causes neglect of genuine spirituality. Kesi [the horse demon] represents the false pride of feeling that "I am a great devotee and spiritual master." Vyomasura [the demon in the sky] represents associating with thieves and other rascals and with people who put themselves forward as incarnations of God.

"In dealing with these more subtle demons," I told my cousin's now exceedingly curious neighbor, "the devotee must fight diligently, acknowledging dependence on Krishna, the original defeater of demons. The pastime of the Kaliya serpent," I told her, "is particularly telling.

"When Krishna fought with Kaliya some 50 centuries ago, He didn't actually kill him. Because of the pleading of Kaliya's wives, and because of Krishna's unending mercy, He just banished the demon, who vowed never to cause trouble again. We, too, will never totally kill our demoniac mentality, but we can certainly transform it into a devotional one.

"Krishna defeated the original Kaliya by dancing on his many hoods, kicking each of his heads like an experienced martial artist. Actually, Krishna is more a 'partial' artist, because he is particularly partial to His devotees."

My cousin's neighbor, Carol, laughed, enjoying my play on words. I decided to play further:

"And speaking of Krishna as a 'partial artist,' the demons — at least those who directly interact with God — are only 'partially' demoniac. That is to say, Krishna has a fighting spirit, a desire for confrontation and competitive rivalry, as we said. We began this discussion, you may remember, by discussing Freddy's violent tendencies, and how they originate in God. Right? Well, because God has such tendencies, certain devotees adopt an adversarial role, just so God can enjoy this variety of interpersonal dealings.

"Further, most of the demons in Krishna's pastimes, like Kaliya, are only 'partially' defeated. Let me explain: though most of them appear to be 'killed' by Krishna, they actually attain a certain kind of liberation, for their adversarial role was really just play (lila), and Krishna rewards them for

fulfilling His desire in this way."

"Wow," she said. "God in the Vaishnava tradition is certainly a complex and multi-faceted individual." She then added, continuing in the humorous mood, "I guess Freddy is only 'partially' aggressive, too. He's actually a great kid." We laughed and looked at each other knowingly, recognizing that there are truths that go beyond a child's passing tantrums, and that even these tantrums have a basis in a reality that is, quite simply, more important.

Krishna: Lord of Paradox

The Bhagavad Gita is one of the world's perennial wisdom texts. As such, it offers clear knowledge of the Absolute and numerous mystical truths, some of which are difficult to understand. Few of its verses, however, are as difficult as 9.4 and 9.5: 'By Me, in my unmanifested form, this entire universe is pervaded. All beings are in Me, but I am not in them." (9.4) "And yet everything that is created does not rest in Me. Behold My mystic opulence! Although I am the maintainer of all living entities and although I am everywhere, I am not a part of this cosmic manifestation, for My Self is the very source of creation." (9.5)

What is Krishna really saying here? First of all, He says that, in His unmanifested form (avyakta murtina, or Brahman), He pervades the universe. Clear enough: God is all-pervading. Then He says that all beings are in Him. If He's everywhere, then all beings exist in Him. No problem. But then it gets somewhat perplexing: He says He is not in them.

This is the beginning of the difficult part. Anyone who has even casually studied the Gita, particularly Srila Prabhupada's Bhagavad Gita as It Is, knows that God is in everything as the Supersoul, known in Sanskrit as the Paramatma. So what does Krishna mean by this, especially since His presence in everything is confirmed throughout the Vedic literature?

After He disavows being in all beings, He says that everything does not rest in Him. This is in stark contradiction to His statement in the previous verse, wherein He boldly declares the opposite. Even Baladeva Vidyabhushana, the renowned Eighteenth-century Gaudiya Vaishnava commentator, asserts that this is a contradiction, and a serious student of the Gita must ask, "How might one resolve it?"

Indeed, Baladeva suggests that when Krishna says, "Behold My mystic opulence" (pasya me yogam aishvaram), He is attempting to resolve the contradiction. Baladeva admits, however, that this is not resolution in any true sense, but rather a proclamation that human words cannot actually explain the Lord: God has inconceivable potency (achintya-shakti).

We encounter a particularly glaring example of Krishna's paradoxical nature in the Sri Isopanisad: "The Supreme Lord walks and does not walk. He is far away, but He is very near as well. He is within everything, and yet He is outside of everything.' (Mantra 5) Srila Prabhupada explains in his commentary:

> The contradictions given here prove the inconceivable potencies of the Lord. "He walks, and He does not walk." Ordinarily, if someone can walk, it is illogical to say he cannot walk. But in reference to God, such a contradiction simply serves to indicate His inconceivable power. With our limited fund of knowledge we cannot accommodate such contradictions, and therefore we conceive of the Lord in terms of our limited powers of understanding. For example, the impersonalist philosophers of the Mayavada school accept only the Lord's impersonal activities and reject His personal feature. But the members of the Bhagavata [Vaishnava] school, adopting the perfect conception of the Lord, accept His inconceivable potencies and thus understand that He is both personal and impersonal. The Bhagavatas know that without inconceivable potencies there can be no meaning to the words "Supreme Lord."

But the two Gita verses in question are more than mere proclamations of God's inconceivable potency. Let us look at these verses more closely. By the term "unmanifested form" (avyakta-murtina), Krishna explains that, although He is ever present, we cannot see Him with our gross senses. Srila Prabhupada's commentary illuminates this idea by way of a verse from the Padma Purana, averring that because Krishna's form, qualities, and pastimes are all of a spiritual nature, material senses cannot perceive them. But Prabhupada quickly adds that when a conditioned soul is awakened to Krishna Consciousness, full understanding and perception of Krishna gradually come to the fore.

In this initial verse, Krishna tells us of His simultaneous transcendence and immanence, that he is removed from matter and that at the same time He exists as its very basis, a complex relationship that He had referred to earlier in the Gita (7.4-5). The material world rests on His energy, but He is removed from it. He is the source of the material world, and He maintains it, but He is not dependent on it, nor does it affect His essential nature. He is free from material nature, but material nature is not free from Him.

This squares well with the commentary of the great Tenth-century teacher Ramanuja, who writes that 9.4 can also read as follows: "All beings are supported by me, though I am not supported by them." In effect, he is saying that Krishna is not dependent upon living entities, though they are clearly

dependent on Him. In this, there is no contradiction.

So this is how 9.4 can be explained, based on the commentaries of the great acharyas. But then we have 9.5: “And yet everything that is created does not rest in Me.” A clear contradiction, as Baladeva Vidyabhushana has already noted.

There is an easy way to understand this. Krishna is reminding us here of His transcendence. Although everything rests in Him, at least in the sense that everything is dependent upon Him, He is fundamentally aloof, existing in His own abode, beyond the material world. In his purport, Prabhupada evokes the image of Atlas, who, lifting the world on his shoulders, seems tired, as if he can accomplish his task only with great struggle. Krishna is not like that, Prabhupada tells us. Rather, His involvement in the material world does not strain His energies one iota. In fact, He engages with matter through His more rudimentary manifestations, Brahman and Paramatma, leaving His original form free to enjoy transcendental activity in the spiritual world.

To help us understand His inconceivable and mystical relationship with the material world, the Lord offers an analogy in the next verse (9.6), and here we might find at least partial resolution to the dilemma: “Understand that as the mighty wind, blowing everywhere, rests always in the sky, all created beings rest in Me.” In other words, Krishna is the backdrop that gives meaning to all existence. Without Him, all is merely illusion. In fact, He is everything, both illusory and real. In the same way, though Krishna is totally aloof — in other words, He is not in all beings and all beings are not in Him — He is very much here as well, fundamentally connected to everyone and everything as their very basis.

Baladeva’s spiritual master, Srila Visvanatha Chakravarti Thakura, raises a question, one that might serve as an addendum to the entire question of Krishna’s inconceivability as expressed in these verses: since Krishna has explained, both by analogy and by describing His achintya-shakti, or inconceivable potency, how these Bhagavad Gita verses might be understood, has He not already resolved the dilemma? Has not His explanation made the inconceivable conceivable? “If so,” Visvanatha writes, “then how is the Lord’s mystic power inconceivable, which He Himself claims it is by saying, ‘Just see My mystic opulence’? After all, we now have a conceivable way of understanding His mystic power.”

Visvanatha Chakravarti then answers his own query: “The example of the sky is offered to give ordinary people an opportunity to begin to understand this subject.” The operative word here is “begin.” Without doubt, the subject of God and His inconceivable potencies is just that — inconceivable. All we can hope for is a hint, a taste, of that inconceivable truth. Indeed, Krishna says that one can know Him as He is only by unmotivated devotional service (11.54). And even then, we can only know Him to the degree that He chooses to reveal Himself.

In conclusion, let us say that, without doubt, the verses in question can be understood in a simple and straightforward manner. After all, Krishna is clearly making a distinction between His manifestation as Brahman, or as an all-pervading force, and His underlying form as Bhagavan, the Supreme Personality of Godhead. By His impersonal manifestation and His expansive energy, He pervades the cosmic creation. This is what He is saying toward the beginning of these verses. But He still remains aloof — this is His way of pointing out that His all-pervasiveness does not co-opt His transcendent personality, which is the very source of creation.

Prabhupada alludes to this in his purport, when he says, “The planetary systems are floating in space, and this space is the energy of the Supreme Lord. But He is different from space. He is differently situated.” (BG 9.5, purport) So everything is in God’s energy, which is an aspect of His self-existent nature, but everything is not in Him as Bhagavan, the Personality of Godhead, who is totally Other.

Though these verses can be understood in this way, in an ultimate sense they allude to the greater mysteries of God’s nature, and therefore Baladeva acknowledges their contradictory status. If one contemplates such mysteries under the guidance of a teacher in Krishna Consciousness, great truths will gradually unfold, and Krishna will be revealed in all His fullness.

Sri Radha: The Feminine Divine

The divine counterpart of Sri Krishna is known as Sri Radha. Together, according to the ancient Vaishnava tradition, this dual-gendered divinity constitutes God — both male and female dimensions of the Absolute Truth. Sri Radha is the complete energy, and Sri Krishna is the complete energetic source. They are non-different from each other, just as musk and its scent are forever merged, or as fire and heat are inseparable.

Radha and Krishna are one, yet they have assumed two separate forms to enjoy loving pastimes. Numerous theological texts explain how this is so, but most thorough are the writings of Krishnadasa Kaviraja Goswami and Rupa Goswami, great masters in the Vaishnava tradition whose books have been translated and commented upon by His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada. To understand Sri Radha, then, English readers would do well to turn to Srila Prabhupada's books.

Sri Radha in Literature

Historically, the ancient puranas reveal much about Sri Radha's manifest pastimes, even if the Srimad Bhagavatam (10.30.28), the cream of all such puranic literature, only mentions Her name once, and that merely with the indirect anayaradhito, indicating that She is "the one who worships Krishna best." Both the Padma Purana and the Brahma-vaivarta Purana, on the other hand, elaborate on Her pastimes of love with Krishna, and how the divine couple is the source of all that is. The latter of these two puranas, in fact, reveals an esoteric creation story in which Radha co-creates the material world with Krishna.

Sri Radha's dominance in Vaishnava theology did not come to light until the Twelfth century, when the saintly poet Jayadeva Goswami wrote his famous Sanskrit work, Gita Govinda. It was after this that Radha and Krishna's spiritual love became a celebrated theme throughout India, colorfully conveyed in festivals and the arts, with the personality of Radha in some ways eclipsing even that of Krishna.

It is important to point out that Jayadeva was emphatic about the spiritual nature of Radha and Krishna's love. He was aware that people could easily misconstrue it as mundane, comparing his work to erotic love poetry (as many still do). Anticipating this misconception, he commenced his Gita Govinda with a section called Dasa-avatara, in which he clearly outlines Krishna's divine nature, listing and glorifying the numerous incarnations associated with His transcendental descent into this world (avatara). With this as a preface, it becomes obvious that the loving affairs to follow — the affairs of this same divine Krishna, who incarnates as so many avataras — are not ordinary. Indeed, they represent the zenith of spiritual love.

This love was expressed more fully after Jayadeva's time. In the Fifteenth century, two Bengali poets, Chandidasa and Vidyapati, wrote beautiful verse about the divine couple, leading up to the time of Sri Chaitanya in the Sixteenth century, who was the combined form of Radha and Krishna in the guise of their own devotee. Sri Chaitanya Himself relished this Bengali poetry, along with Jayadeva's breakthrough Sanskrit work. He also enjoyed hearing the story of Radha and Krishna as expressed in the ancient work of Bilvamangala Thakur, Sri Krishna-karnamrta, and in a contemporary poem, Ramananda Raya's Jagannatha-vallabha-natakam.

Sri Chaitanya's own followers were quick to add their own realizations and insights based squarely on the earlier literature. Two outstanding examples are the Radha-rasa-sudha-nidhi Stotram, composed by Prabhodananda Saraswati, and the Sri-Sri-Radha-Krishna-ganoddesa-dîpika, by Rupa Goswami, the latter of which is easily the most detailed exposition of Sri Radha's divine personality ever published.

Her Divine Pastimes

How does Her story unfold in the world of three dimensions? Early one morning, in the bucolic atmosphere of Vraja some fifty centuries ago, Vrsabhanu Maharaja was taking his morning bath in the holy Yamuna River. Just then, a beautiful baby girl floated by, lying on a radiant and fully blossomed lotus. With intense glee, he embraced the divine infant and carried Her off to his queen, Kirtida-devi.

When Kirtida saw her husband with this magnificent child, she ran over and showered little Radha with unrelenting affection.

But the king and queen quickly noticed that the baby's eyes did not open. This naturally broke their hearts, and they prayed that God might bless Her with the power of sight.

Soon, Nanda Maharaja's queen, Yashoda-devi, arrived from Gokula, holding young Sri Krishna in her arms. Vrsabhanu and Kirtida, now the parents of Sri Radha, greeted her with due honor, but Yashoda could not take her eyes off the newborn baby girl resting in Kirtida-devi's arms.

At that moment, as Yashoda drew closer to baby Krishna, an earth-shattering incident took place. As soon as Krishna came face-to-face with the baby girl, She opened Her eyes — for the first time. Appropriately, Her first sight was the moon-like face of Her beloved Sri Krishna, and She simply paused as She gazed upon His lovely form.

Krishna too was overwhelmed with love as He saw His eternal consort, in baby form, sitting before Him.

In this way, the scriptures relate how the eternal divine couple go about "meeting" each other as they appear, time and again, in the material world. As they "grow in years," they play with loving friends, swim in the Yamuna, graze their cows, and relish each other's loving embrace. Sacred texts and the realizations of the sages elaborate on the details, establishing narratives that serve as virtual magnets, attracting all who hear them back to the spiritual realm.

Of all such narratives, the Rasa-lila, the circular dance of love described in the Srimad Bhagavatam, is probably the most important.

The divine dance takes place one moonlit autumn night when the cowherd maidens (gopis) of Vrindavana, upon hearing the sound of Krishna's flute, sneak away from their families to be with Him. The Rasa-lila is considered one of the highest and most esoteric of Krishna's revealed pastimes, and it should never be confused with mundane pastimes of prurient interest. Accordingly, the commentators make one thing perfectly clear: romantic love between human beings is a diminished, compromised reflection of the soul's original, ecstatic love for Krishna, God, in the spiritual world. Studying the Rasa-lila, under a bona fide spiritual master, allows one to realize this as a tangible truth. It also allows one to develop love for God, just as the gopis do in their dance of love.

Conclusion

In short, Sri Radha, both in terms of who She is and in terms of Her theological meaning, is deep. The scriptures describe that one must go through many lives of pious activities, religious rituals, and yogic perfection before attaining the mercy of Sri Radha. And when one does, Krishna is not far off. In fact, it is through Sri Radha's mercy that Krishna becomes attainable.

She is His mercy incarnation, and through Her, one can attain the culmination of the spiritual pursuit. Srila Prabhupada sums this up as follows: "Radharani, You are so dear to Krishna. So we offer our respectful obeisances unto You." Radharani is hari-priya: "very dear to Krishna." Through the mercy of Radharani we can easily approach Krishna. If Radharani recommends, "This devotee is very nice," then Krishna immediately accepts me, however great a fool I may be. Because I am recommended by Radharani, Krishna accepts me. Therefore in Vrindavana you'll find all the devotees chanting Radharani's name more than Krishna's. Wherever you'll go, you'll find the devotees greeting one another, "Jaya Radhe!" You'll find this still in Vrindavana. The devotees are glorifying Radharani. If you go by the speculative process to understand Krishna, it will take many, many lives. But if you take to devotional service and just try to please Radharani, Krishna will be gotten very easily. Radharani can deliver Krishna. She is so great a devotee, the emblem of maha-bhagavata. Even Krishna cannot understand the quality of Radharani's devotion. Although Krishna says vedaham samatitani — "I know everything" -- He fails to understand Radharani. She is so great.

It is in pursuit of these truths that Radha and Krishna descend as Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, for in that form they taste the highest mercy and bestow that mercy on others. The chief manifestation of said mercy is the holy name in the form of the maha-mantra: Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare/ Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare.

In this mantra, both Radha and Krishna are fully manifest. A prayer to Sri Radha (Hare is the vocative form of Hara, another name for Radharani), it beseeches Krishna to be engaged in devotional service, the highest form of yoga. Radha is the medium through which such service is enacted, for She is the embodiment of devotion — the essence of love for Krishna.

The Truth of Lord Jagannath: A Personal Meditation

The same result obtained from seeing the Lord's ten most prominent incarnations is available simply by once gazing upon the Supreme Person in his form as Lord Jagannath.[51]

In many ways, Lord Jagannath is unique. For example, in keeping with his rather all-encompassing name ("Lord of the Universe"), over the course of centuries he has been identified with nearly every deity in the Hindu pantheon, from tribal image to Buddha, from Kamadeva to Narasimhadeva, from Shiva to the Goddess. Most prominently, of course, he is identified with Sri Krishna. But even here a certain uniqueness shines forth: he doesn't look like Krishna at all.

Krishna's form is usually described as the pinnacle of beauty, with large lotus eyes, exotic blue complexion, raven black hair adorned with colorful peacock feather, a mischievous smile and a silver flute caressing his inviting, reddish lips. But Jagannath doesn't share those characteristics, at least not to the common eye. His appearance is almost crude. Although he is Krishna himself, he is abstract, stylized, visually primitive. His body shows no legs and two arms dart out from his sides, his hands indicated merely by outline drawings of a discus and a conch, the symbols of the divine Vishnu. His large form is jet black, and so are his eyes, which are almost comically round, encircled, as they are, by red lining and by the whites of his divine oculus. He is baldly rectangular in shape, as if purposely mocking the elegant and graceful beauty we have come to identify with Krishna. A thoughtful onlooker could imagine Lord Jagannath saying, "Do not view beauty superficially. Look deeper. Only then will you truly understand me."

Puranic literature tells his story. Slightly divergent versions appear in the Skanda Purana (Utkal Khanda, chapters 1-19); the Brahma Purana (Part 2, chapters 41-47); the Narada Purana (Uttarabhaga, chapters 53 and 54); the Kapila Samhita (texts 1.12-2.30); the Sharala Mahabharata (Vana-parva and Musali-parva); and the Deula Tola, with versions by Nilambara Das and Sishu Krishna Das, both Oriya poets. There are several other versions, too.

In particular, there are two interesting tales revealing why he looks the way he does. First is the story of King Indradyumna, which is the one detailed in the Puranic texts mentioned above, and who was asked by Lord Krishna to carve a deity from a very special log that would soon wash up on the shore of Puri. Not a carpenter himself, he searched for the right person to make the deities. As fate would have it, he found a mysterious old Brahmin carpenter who would rise to the task. Oddly, the carpenter insisted that no one disturb him while he crafted the image, and that he would immediately leave if anyone did. With this firmly agreed upon, he quickly began carving behind closed doors.

The entire kingdom was anxious to see the finished form of the Lord, but no one more than the King and Queen. Every day they would ease up to the closed doors, careful not to disturb the divine carpenter, and never peeking through the doors' small cracks. Still, they could hear the sound of a man hard at work, and that sufficed — for a while.

After about one week, Indradyumna's impatient Queen barged through the doors, only to find the deity half-finished. The carpenter had vanished, too, as he had said he would. The text then reveals the mysterious artisan's true identity: he was none other than Vishvakarma, the architect of the heavens. In the end, the king was distraught. The deity had no arms and no legs, and certainly did not look like a murti of Krishna. Utterly repentant that he had interrupted the carving, the King was only pacified when sage Narada appeared on the scene, explaining that the form of Jagannath is a legitimate manifestation of the Supreme Person.

One might wonder just why Narada would say such a thing. True, love and devotion reigned in the heart of the divine artisan, and this is the main prerequisite for carving a form of the Lord. But Vaishnava tradition tells us another side of the story, one that specifically addresses the distinct — one might say peculiar — forms of Jagannath, Baladeva, and Subhadra. This more esoteric reason for the deities' appearance centers on one particular incident in which Krishna happened to eavesdrop on the queens of Dvaraka as they spoke amongst themselves of his pastimes in Vraja. It was Rohini, mother of Balarama (or, according to other accounts, it was Vrindadevi or Devaki), who indeed knew him in his earlier bucolic days, and who happened to be narrating these specific tales of love.

The women had instructed Krishna's sister Subhadra to keep watch, making sure that Krishna wasn't nearby, lest he overhear their confidential discussion. Predictably, Subhadra was soon distracted by their heartfelt verbal exchanges, gradually becoming engrossed and consequently

neglecting her duty. Because of this, she missed the fact that Krishna and Balarama were approaching the area. As the brothers came within earshot, they listened to the loving talk of Rohini and her friends. Soon, the divine brothers were overtaken with the love of their devotees. Their hair stood on end, their arms retracted, their eyes grew larger and larger, and they smiled broadly in ecstasy — all symptoms of ecstatic bliss. This, the Vaishnava tradition tells us, is why Jagannath, Baladeva and Subhadra look the way they do.

Neither Here Nor There: Exploring Borders with Lord Narasimhadeva

The cold winter day was offset by my warm compartment on the train. I could see snow from my snug window seat, but a soft pillow assured me that this would be a pleasant trip. I very much wanted this long, relaxing ride. It had been an intense conference: the Toronto American Academy of Religion. Now I would spend a full day returning home. I could read, chant, and nap, and my plan was to do exactly those things, and in that order.

In the seat to my right was an elderly woman with unusually long nails. She seemed obsessed with putting polish on them, bright red nail polish. I was torn between spying on her cosmetic chore, which she tended to with visible enthusiasm, and admiring the oncoming evening sky. It was the dark part of twilight, with the Sun going down in the distance. It reminded me of the cover of Bhagavad Gita as It Is, the battlefield scene dominated by Krishna and Arjuna on their chariot; the background reveals a dusky sky, with bits of yellow, red and ever darker shades of blue.

Just then, the conductor announced that we would soon be stopping for some time at the Canadian-New York border. Customs wanted to be sure that no terrorists were on the train. Within five minutes, we were there, sitting at what would turn out to be a protracted stop, between New York and Canada. "Where are we?" I asked the woman sitting next to me. "Is this considered New York or Canada?"

"We're in both," she said, taking a moment to forsake her nails. "Or," she added, with a wry smile, "maybe we're in neither."

As we both enjoyed her thought-provoking comment — and as I gazed at her long, red nails — I began to think of Narasimhadeva, a prominent incarnation of Krishna, who is half-man and half lion. Lord Narasimha's nails are also described as long and scary-looking.

But it was more than her nails. It is my habit to think of this particular incarnation of Krishna when things seem suspicious or frightening, like a customs check for terrorists. The sacred scriptures describe that Lord Narasimha protects His devotees from all manner of calamity. But there was still more than the nails and the protection factor. It was that it was dusk and that we were at the border of Canada and New York.

Narasimhadeva: Some Background

Nara means "man" and simha means "lion," and Narasimhadeva is indeed a "man-lion." But, really, He is so much more. Clearly, by His four arms, He is identified as Vishnu, the Lordly form of Krishna, and He is listed in all Puranic scriptures as a genuine manifestation of the Supreme. He is, however, unlike any other Incarnation.

First of all, He is ferocious: His sharp, thirsty teeth, His long, frightening nails (which would be the envy of my co-passenger!), His deafening cries for the blood of Hiranyakashipu, an infamous demon-king — all these distinguish Him among incarnations of Vishnu.

His ferocity, which is reserved for demons like Hiranyakashipu, is often juxtaposed with His beauty and benevolence, traits that are more obvious to His devotees. When He manifested Himself to rid the world of Hiranyakashipu, millennia ago, His gleaming fangs were the characteristics with which the demon became most acquainted. The Lord's quivering tongue and innumerable arms (sometimes manifesting four, and, at other times, even more) were increasingly visible when Hiranyakashipu moved closer, in a vain attempt to do battle with Him, as we will soon explain. The demon became all-too-intimate with Narasimhadeva's razor-sharp claws.

Hiranyakashipu: The King of Demons

Having performed severe austerities that would be the envy of accomplished yogis, Hiranyakashipu developed untold mystic powers, but he used them only for his own selfish ends. Thus, in his day, millions of years ago, he defeated all who vied for his post and, with great arrogance, mocked all who challenged him. Moreover, intoxicated with his well-earned excellence, he challenged every worthy being in the universe to any number and variety of duels, and he always won.

There was a reason, not only for his success but for his confidence: as a result of his austerities, he was offered a boon, anything he wanted, from Lord Brahma, the first created being. Initially, he asked Brahma for immortality. But Brahma explained to him that this was not possible. "Even I," said Brahma, who has a life-span lasting millions of years, "must one day die."

So he asked Brahma for the following assurances: that he could never be slain indoors or outdoors, on the ground or in the air, by day or by night, by man or by beast, or by any weapon known to man. In this way, when Brahma agreed, the demon thought he had tricked the creator-god into securing his immortality. And so he went on conquering and terrorizing the universe.

However, the saintly little boy Prahlad, Hiranyakashipu's own son, was a thorn in the demon's side. Although their family was notoriously demoniac, burdening the world with a series of evil kings with political agendas and lascivious lifestyles, Prahlad was highly devotional, a pious boy with no interest other than serving the Lord. In school, at the tender age of five, he would encourage his friends to sing and dance in spiritual ecstasy. This frustrated Hiranyakashipu to no end, leading him to make attempts on his own son's life. Each attempt failed, however, because Vishnu Himself invariably arranged for the boy's rescue.

The Man-Lion Appears

Completely vexed, the demon-king thought he might reason with his child: "You worship someone as Lord, someone whom you think is greater than I? Where is He? Show me this God of yours." Prahlad merely answered that His sweet Lord is everywhere. "Even in this pillar?" asked Hiranyakashipu.

Prahlad affirmed that God is all-pervading, and that He was also in the pillar right in front of them. The demon could hear no more, and, drawing his sword, smacked the pillar with all his strength. At that moment, Narasimhadeva, the half-man and half-lion form of God, jumped out of the pillar and toward Hiranyakashipu.

Fearful of the Lord's intense ferociousness, the demon nonetheless attacked Him with determined enthusiasm. Appearing like a meager wasp in the presence of Lord Narasimha, he raised his sword and shield and was ready for combat. Lord Narasimha had no weapons, only His long lion nails, on all four Vishnu-like hands, His deafening growl, and His sharp teeth. It was particularly His nails that Hiranyakashipu came to know.

The Boon Finally Comes to Pass

The battle with Hiranyakashipu was no challenge for the Lord of all. Narasimhadeva snatched him up, like a cat might capture a mouse, and killed him. The Lord was a sight to behold, incensed by the demon's arrogance and offended by the way he had treated little Prahlad.

Narasimhadeva's eyes, which glistened with wrath, resembled molten gold, as did His dress and crown. His teeth reflected the deadly dread in Hiranyakashipu's eyes. His nostrils and mouth appeared like the caves of a huge mountain. His jaws parted fearfully and His claws beckoned Hiranyakashipu, who saw in them his inevitable demise. In one quick motion, the Lord placed the demon on His lap and, in the doorway of the assembly hall, tore him to pieces with the nails of His hand.

The Lord's mouth and mane were sprinkled with the demon's blood, and His fierce eyes, full of anger, were impossible to look at. Licking the edge of His mouth with His tongue, Lord Narasimhadeva, decorated with a garland of intestines ripped from Hiranyakashipu's abdomen, resembled a lion that has just killed its prey.

Lord Brahma's boon was never violated: Hiranyakashipu was killed nether by man nor beast, but by Narasimhadeva, who was God as a hybrid entity: part man and part beast. Neither was he killed inside nor outside, but at the threshold of the assembly hall. It was neither day nor night, but at twilight. The death did not occur in the air, nor on the ground, but in Narasimhadeva's lap. And Hiranyakashipu was not killed by any weapon known to man, but by the naked claws of the divine man-lion.

Back to the Border

And so there I was, between day and night, at dusk; not on land or water, but on a train; not in New York or Canada, but on the border. The long, red nails in front of me, and the fear of terrorists on the train, brought the story home. As I contemplated Lord Narasimha, I shared the story with the woman next to me, and I spoke to her about the thought-provoking nature of borders. In philosophy, this is called the principle of liminality: existence at the threshold, an in-between state that is neither here nor there, or both here and there.

The Narasimha story, I told her, includes numerous layers of such in-betweens. Prahlad, for example, is from a family of demons, and yet he is best among the devotees. Even Krishna says, in the Bhagavad Gita (10.30), "Of Daityas, I am Prahlad." The Daityas were a race of celestial adversaries, more in line with Hiranyakashipu's demeanor than that of his son Prahlad, who, apparently, broke the mold. So, Prahlad is both: he is born a Daitya, but is also a Deva, or godlike devotee, by qualification.

Another example of a liminal state: Hiranyakashipu is both a hedonistic sensualist and an accomplished ascetic. He was inclined to barbarism and selfishness, and yet had the determination, albeit for the wrong reasons, to acquire the boon described in the story. This accomplishment showed a tremendous display of penance and austerity. So while he was clearly a self-centered demon on one hand, he warranted Lord Brahma's favor on the other.

Lord Narasimha Himself is part man and part lion, which can be seen as another example of liminality. Also, He emerges from a pillar — cold, hard matter — and yet He is the supreme spirit, symbolizing, again, the convergence of opposites. Ultimately, the conditions of Hiranyakashipu's death is a virtual study of liminal states, with twilight, threshold, and so on.

The train started to pull out of the station. My neighbor was enthralled by the Narasimha story. "Amazing," she said. "But how does this apply to us? I mean, now we walk away from this threshold scene, and our interaction with borders is only temporary."

"Exactly," I told her, "because we are not God, and our life in this world is temporary and limited, unlike Lorrd Narasimha's. Being God, His story is eternal and unlimited."

As we parted at Penn Station in New York, I left her with some concluding words: "There is a sense in which we can take this border idea with us. In the Vedic literature, we — all living beings — are described as tatastha-shakti, or marginal energy. The word tatastha comes from the Sanskrit root, tata, which refers to the border between ocean and land, that imaginary line that separates the two. It's considered 'imaginary' because it is indefinable, perpetually pulling back and moving out towards sea. In the same way, the living being is essentially spiritual but has a tendency to fluctuate between matter and spirit, leaning toward one or the other at various times."

She shook her head: "This is deep."

"Right," I said. "So always remember that you are a spirit soul temporarily caught in a material world, and that Lord Narasimha is the Supreme Godhead."

We stopped in front of a bookstore as she smiled and waved goodbye, her long, red nails a reminder of our spiritual discussion. She then pointed to a canopy above her head, indicating that she was entering a store named "Borders." We laughed one last time, and went our separate ways.

Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu: The Father of Modern Kirtan

"O merciful Sri Chaitanya, O sea of compassion—may the beautiful flowing waters of your spiritual activities find a home on my desert-like tongue. These waters are made even more beautiful, no doubt, with the lotus flowers of singing, dancing, and the loud chanting of Krishna's holy name — which is kirtan, the special wealth of unalloyed devotees. These devotees are compared to swans, birds, and honeybees, whose hearts are immeasurably gladdened by the ocean of your being."
—Krishnadas Kaviraj Goswami, Chaitanya Charitamrita (Adi-lila, 2.2)

In the late Fifteenth century, European kings sent explorers to mystical India, expecting to find treasures beyond their wildest imagination. Many predictably returned home with silks, spices, artwork, and magnificent jewels — the usual assets that travelers brought back from exotic and rich lands. Valuable though these prizes were, the visiting foreigners had, in fact, inadvertently bypassed India's real treasure, which somehow escaped them. And the ultimate irony is this: it was precisely at that time that Chaitanya Mahaprabhu was gracing India with His presence. His mission: to make accessible the essence of Krishna-bhakti, the mystical path of yogic devotion, which had for so long remained hidden in esoteric texts and in the minds and hearts of spiritual adepts. This was indeed the best that India had to offer. But no explorer was looking for it.

Prior to Sri Chaitanya's time, a reawakening of Krishna-bhakti had swept the subcontinent, drawing on centuries-old Sanskrit texts and vernacular poetry composed by Sri Chaitanya's distinguished predecessors. Now, he and his followers would add spice to an already flavorful Vedic recipe, showing how to put the deep theology of devotion into practice by emphasizing the power of the holy name. And through this method, he enthusiastically gave love for Krishna to all who would have it.

Along the way, he pioneered a momentous social and spiritual movement that continues to spread its profound influence worldwide. At the very least, he transformed India in four ways: philosophically, by establishing the logic of a personal Absolute named Krishna and the need for rendering loving service unto Him; socially, by opposing the blindly rigid caste system and setting in place a universal doctrine that is open to everyone; politically, by organizing India's first civil disobedience movement against a repressive secular government; and, most important, spiritually, by teaching and demonstrating that Divine love is the secret meaning behind all Vedic texts; that it is a cooling balm capable of healing the world's woes; and that it is the ultimate non-sectarian teaching at the root of all religion.

Who is Sri Chaitanya?

Bengal, India, 1486. It was a time of change. The political and social climate was dense, creating paradigm shifts not only among intellectuals, but among common people as well. Even religion, which had always been at the center of Bengali life, was moving toward radical transformation, with practitioners questioning core values and well-established beliefs. In many ways, this was the perfect time for Sri Chaitanya to appear, for his methods of God-realization, though grounded in traditional scriptures and supported by the philosophical conclusions of his predecessors, were revolutionary, augmenting age-old practices with new approaches and staid interpretations of scripture with explications of inner meaning.

Sri Chaitanya was born into a world of yogis, pandits, and saints—a world he would soon dominate, not by political strategies or managerial prowess but rather by wisdom, strength of character, and unremitting love.

As a teenager, he had become a scholar of significant renown, but by his early twenties he had set all academic pursuits aside in favor of love of Krishna. His transformation took place under the tutelage of Ishvara Puri, an accomplished teacher in the well-established Madhva lineage, who initiated him into the chanting of the holy name.

With this blissful name on his lips, he became like a live wire, rousing everyone in his path with the electricity of devotion. Divine love emanated from his very being, like an unstoppable current of

spiritual power. The pandit (scholarship) gave way to prema (love of God). The path of knowledge, jnana (dialectics), moved aside, and bhakti (devotion) reigned supreme. Though he initially married and led a responsible family life, he eventually set aside worldly concerns, preferring instead the life of an ascetic, an itinerant monk.

His approach to monastic life, however, was revolutionary. Unlike other mendicants of his time, who emphasized serious Vedic study and rigorous meditation techniques, he merely wandered from town to town, singing and dancing. He shared his considerable philosophy only when necessary, focusing instead on the love, joy, and the understanding that comes from Krishna's name. His was a practical form of yoga: "Don't deny the senses," he taught, "but rather use them in Krishna's service. Don't run away from the world, but, instead, run single-pointedly toward the Divine." This was his strong recommendation, to be performed with a sense of exuberance that was unknown to previous forms of yoga and meditation, with their solemn practice of mantras and severe austerities. His was a colorful world of song, dance, art, and dramatic performance. Sri Chaitanya was an aesthetic ascetic.

With his vibrant yet simple teaching of divine love, he spent many years traveling India's countryside, attracting numerous followers and disciples. In the north, he met Sufis and Muslims, and in the south, Buddhists and Advaitins. All would find harmony and respite in his dance of love.

And yet he was not a mere sentimentalist. When the greatest of scholars found themselves in his company, he would not disappoint them. Indeed, leading philosophers of the day sought him out, just to enhance their knowledge of ultimate truth as embodied in the Vedic scriptures. Even the Six Goswamis of Vrindavana, who were arguably the most accomplished theologians of the time, became his disciples. They systematized his teaching and produced numerous volumes of profound philosophy.

As a result of his personal charisma, learning, and exemplary character, and because of the notable personalities who surrounded him, he became something of a celebrity, with hundreds of thousands adopting his teaching. He would give them the holy name, proclaiming kirtan as the yoga of the modern age. All of India's elite came to see him, to learn his methods and to receive his blessings. His personality was irresistible, his approach to life, contagious.

One might naturally ask: who was Sri Chaitanya, really? The earliest Gaudiya Vaishnava texts tell us that he was Vishnu, come to Earth to inaugurate the yuga-dharma, or the process of God-realization for our current epoch in world history: the chanting of the holy name. But this, say those same texts, was only the external reason for his appearance. There was an internal reason as well. On the deepest level, he was Krishna — the source of all avatars, the primary manifestation of the Supreme — appearing in a humanlike form. He comes as a human to taste the love His devotees have for him — to taste it from their unique perspective, as humans.

Additionally, he wanted to taste it from the perspective of his most dedicated devotee, Sri Radha, who is none other than Krishna Himself in female form. In Sri Chaitanya, then, God is said to take on the mood and emotional disposition of His female counterpart, Sri Radha, merging lover and beloved in one spiritual body. Thus, according to Gaudiya Vaishnava theology, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu is a combined manifestation of Radha and Krishna, one in which God fully experiences His own love and that of His devotees as well.

For the final twelve years of his manifest pastimes, he settled in Puri, deeply absorbed in meditation. His consciousness immersed in the mystical dimensions of union and separation, the twin emotions of love central to Krishna devotion, he shared these inner feelings with his most confidential devotees, not only with words but by the symptoms he exhibited in day-to-day life. He would cry and laugh simultaneously, like a madman; run after shadows, hoping they were in fact his beloved; and passionately call out, "Krishna!, Krishna!," like a victim of unrequited love.

His followers observed him carefully, taking scrupulous notes. Documenting his every move, they devised a science of devotion, noting exactly how love of God develops, the symptoms one experiences along the way, and how to gauge proper advancement on the path. This was, after all, part of Sri Chaitanya's reason for being: to experience the emotions of a genuine devotee of the Lord and to show how this experience could be replicated by those who sincerely adopt his process.

By the time of his departure for the spiritual world in 1533, his love resembled a tsunami, a tornado, the solar ejecta. Shridhar Maharaj, a pure devotee in the line of Sri Chaitanya, said it best: his love was comparable to a golden volcano, with eruptions of ecstasy that flowed like molten lava. This volcanic emission continues to flow, throughout India and, in recent years, the rest of the world.

His Miracles

Aside from sharing the bliss of kirtan, Sri Chaitanya exhibited many miracles, situating him on a par with the greatest of spiritual masters and the most powerful of mystic yogis. Though his biographers relate numerous accounts of his miraculous deeds, a few examples should suffice here.

It is said that when he was an infant, he would weep continually, more than other children. But when his mother and the neighboring ladies finally cried, Haribol — "chant the names of God" — he would invariably stop crying, with his temperament immediately changing to one of glee. For this reason, his childhood home frequently resounded with the chanting of Krishna's names, presaging his future mission.

During his married years, he displayed a number of miracles, too, especially in the house of Shrivas Thakur, which is where he inaugurated the Sankirtan mission. It was here that his nocturnal kirtans transformed his followers into the best of yogis, adepts in the spiritual practice of intonating the holy name. The sheer ecstasy of these kirtans nearly drove all attendees mad, causing them to jump, howl, and shed tears of bliss.

One day, after such an ecstatic kirtan, Mahaprabhu casually asked the devotees what they wanted to eat. When they unanimously expressed their desire for mangoes, even though the fruit was then out of season, he took a mango seed and quickly buried it in Shrivas's courtyard. Immediately, the seed sprouted, miraculously appearing as a full-grown mango tree right before their eyes. It supplied enough ripened fruits to accommodate each of them, and it continued to do so for the rest of their lives.

On another occasion, Mahaprabhu journeyed to Puri through the dense jungles of the Jarakhanda Forest. The uncharted terrain frightened his inexperienced associate, Balabhadra, his sole traveling companion, who had heard about the wild beasts who made it their home. As the two pilgrims journeyed through the wooded area, however, Balabhadra's concerns were eventually set aside: he saw that Mahaprabhu's chanting and dancing soothed the savage beasts appearing in their midst, causing even lions, tigers and elephants to dance with abandon. Hearing Sri Chaitanya chant the names of Krishna, they all howled in their respective tongues, and Balabhadra, who later reported the incident to the other devotees, could hardly believe his eyes.

In due course, Mahaprabhu cured a leper known as Vasudeva, raised Shrivas Thakur's son from the dead, and healed many needy souls in Jesus-like fashion. Most such miracles were not witnessed by the masses, but only by his inner circle of associates. Word spread fast, however, and his following grew.

Other miracles were seen by the multitudes. Perhaps the most famous of these occurred in Puri, during the Ratha-yatra festival. At this massive celebration, in which a huge, wheeled chariot is pulled by hundreds of enthusiastic devotees, with hundreds of thousands watching, the cart suddenly stopped. It simply would not move. All the assembled devotees tried with their combined strength to push it forward, but their endeavor proved futile. The gigantic elephants of Puri's Raja were brought in, but they, too, failed to move the cart. Everyone present was baffled by this inexplicable dilemma, not knowing what to do. Just then, Mahaprabhu arrived and placed his head up against the immovable cart. Applying minimal pressure, the enormous vehicle moved forward, to everyone's amazement. All the visiting pilgrims shouted "Haribol!" in appreciation of Sri Chaitanya's miracle.

At the same festival, because of his insatiable desire to taste the bliss of kirtan, he appeared in seven different chanting parties simultaneously. His numerous associates cried with ecstasy as they watched him manifest in several places at once, a mystical yogic feat that few can actually perform. King Prataparudra, the regional king, was particularly awestruck by this magical happening, and surrendered his heart, then and there, to Sri Chaitanya.

It should be mentioned, too, that Mahaprabhu frequently revealed his divinity to his intimate followers, but with the caveat that they not disclose this truth to anyone, at least until after his manifest pastimes. Such disclosure, he said, would hinder his ability to experience the mood of a devotee. If people knew his divine status, they would openly worship him as God, and this would go against the project of his particular incarnation — to live as a devotee and to experience love for Krishna from a devotee's unique perspective.

Even so, early on, Mahaprabhu revealed his divinity in the house of Shrivas Thakur, when all of his associates became aware of his identity that he was an incarnation of Vishnu. At various times, he showed his Universal Form, including all the universes and living beings together in one spot, inconceivably; and he displayed his six-armed form to Lord Nityananda and others. This included the two arms of Krishna, playing His flute, as well as Ramachandra's arms, with bow and arrow. Ultimately, he revealed his Rasaraj-mahabhava Swarup, his form as a combined manifestation of

Radha and Krishna, to Sri Ramananda Raya, who was a loving devotee and a well-known governor in the Rajahmundry District of South India. Mahaprabhu's divinity was anything but secret, even in Bengal during his own manifest pastimes.

Miracles alone, of course, do not establish Godhood, nor do they legitimize a given religious path. Indeed, the Hindu religious tradition would eventually be overrun with those claiming to be God, and with nuances of belief that led to many diverse traditions. Anticipating this, Sri Chaitanya's more scholarly associates developed a series of complex theological tests by which such things can be determined. The most important is this: an avatara is generally described in scripture, if not explicitly mentioned by name and parentage, then by innate personal characteristics. A close look at Vedic and post-Vedic texts confirm Sri Chaitanya's divinity. In but one of many scriptural references, Lord Krishna says in the Vayu Purana: "In the Age of Kali, when the Sankirtan movement is inaugurated, I shall descend as the son of Sachidevi."

Conclusion

He inspired hundreds of thousands in his own lifetime, and many millions more after that. His mission engulfed all of India and has gradually burst out, as already mentioned, into the rest of the world. Even religious scholars, who have little or no connection to the Vaishnava tradition, have become aware of his unique contribution and the power of his personal example. Christian theologian John Moffitt—to cite one example—wrote of him in adulatory terms:

> If I were asked to choose one man in Indian religious history who best represents the pure spirit of devotional self-giving, I would choose the Vaishnavite saint Chaitanya, whose full name in religion was Krishna-Chaitanya, or "Krishna Consciousness." Of all the saints in recorded history, East or West, he seems to me the supreme example of a soul carried away on a tide of ecstatic love of God. This extraordinary man, who belongs to the rich period beginning with the end of the Fourteenth century, represents the culmination of the devotional schools that grew up around Krishna… Chaitanya delighted intensely in nature. It is said that, like St. Francis of Assisi, he had a miraculous power over wild beasts. His life in the holy town of Puri is the story of a man in a state of almost continuous spiritual intoxication. Illuminating discourses, deep contemplation, moods of loving communion with God, were daily occurrences.[52]

Although widely known as a scholar in his youth, Sri Chaitanya left the world only eight verses, called Shikshashtaka, which sum up his teaching. At first glance, the verses seem rather simple, but they are not. They express an appreciation for the holy name; an awareness of exactly how the name should be chanted; an element of regret, showing how one should long for greater taste in the practice of chanting; the importance of humility in approaching the name; and, finally, the overwhelming feeling of love in separation, where one is virtually consumed by the desire to unite with God. Here are the eight verses in full:

> 1. Glory to Sri Krishna Sankirtan, which cleanses the heart of all the dust accumulated for years and extinguishes the fire of conditioned life, of repeated birth and death. This Sankirtan movement is the prime benediction for humanity at large because it spreads the rays of the benediction moon. It is the life of all transcendental knowledge, increasing the ocean of transcendental bliss and enabling one and all to fully taste the nectar for which they are always anxious.
>
> 2. O my Lord, Your holy name alone can render all benediction to living beings, and thus You have hundreds and millions of names, like Krishna and Govinda. In these transcendental names You have invested all Your transcendental energies. There are not even hard and fast rules for chanting these names. O my Lord, out of kindness You enable us to easily approach You merely by chanting, but I am so unfortunate that I have no attraction for it.
>
> 3. One should chant the holy name of the Lord in a humble state of mind, thinking oneself lower than the straw in the street; one should be more tolerant than a tree, devoid of all sense of false prestige and ready to offer all respect to others. In such a state of mind, one can chant the holy name of the Lord constantly.
>
> 4. O almighty Lord, I have no desire to accumulate wealth, nor do I desire beautiful women, nor do I want any number of followers. I only want Your causeless devotional service birth after birth.
>
> 5. O son of Maharaja Nanda [Krishna], I am Your eternal servitor, yet somehow or other I have fallen into the ocean of birth and death. Please pick me up from this ocean of death and place me as one of the atoms at Your lotus feet.

6. O my Lord, when will my eyes be decorated with tears of love flowing constantly when I chant Your holy name? When will my voice choke up, and when will the hairs of my body stand on end at the recitation of Your name?

7. O Govinda! Feeling Your separation, I am considering a moment to be like an eternity. Tears are flowing from my eyes like torrents of rain, and I am feeling completely vacant in Your absence.

8. I know no one but Krishna as my Lord, and He shall remain so even if He handles me roughly by His embrace or makes me brokenhearted by not being present before me. He is completely free to do anything and everything, for He is always my worshipful Lord unconditionally.

What more needs to be said?

Part IV: Saints, Sages and Demigods

Demigods, Bhaktivinoda Thakura, and Universal Religious Categories: A New Look at Krishna and the Many Divinities Who Surround Him

An interesting thing happened recently: an old high school buddy who persistently debates with me the verity of Krishna Consciousness finally relented, albeit with certain reservations. "Okay," he ventured, "I can accept that Krishna is a name for God. But who are all these other entities? Brahma, Shiva, Ganesh? Come on, do we really need all these other divinities? Isn't there really just one God?"

At first blush, those acquainted with Krishna Consciousness would have to say that it appears polytheistic, acknowledging the various gods associated with the Vedic pantheon. But, if we look slightly beneath the surface, we see there is more to this so-called polytheism than meets the eye.

The concept of "monotheism," that there is one supreme God, tends to be associated with the Abrahamic religions, such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, but it is also found in the traditions of the Druze, in the Platonic conceptions of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, and in Vaishnavism, among others. So, the first point to be acknowledged is that monotheism is more pervasive than is commonly understood.

Secondly, due to monotheism's association with Biblical religion, it is often seen as necessarily opposed to pantheistic and polytheistic points of view. But all is not so simple. In fact, monotheism overlaps with Indic monism — the idea that everything is, in some sense, God — and standard monotheistic religions, too, sometimes include a plurality of "gods." For example, certain Christian groups see God as a "Trinity," or three eternal persons — the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. In this way, both pantheism and polytheism sometimes interpenetrate monotheism and vice-versa.

Indeed, the following Vedic aphorism is recommended as a meditation for all who wish to understand such higher realities: "Truth is one, though the wise refer to it in various ways." (Rig Veda 1.164.46)

The above verse, found in one of the oldest religious scriptures known to man, hints at the mystery and diversity that is Krishna Consciousness. Since its focus is "the one and the many," it overlaps with ideas of monotheism and polytheism, and it should be explored in terms of our present discussion. Just prior to this verse, one may note, the Rig Veda praises its exotic pantheon of gods, and only then are we told that God, or Truth, is ultimately one, though known variously. What does this mean? It points to a monotheistic idea of deity, surely, but to what else? And how does it relate to the Vaishnava tradition, with its many gods and goddesses?

On the face of it, we know, adherents of Indian religion believe in many divinities — Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, the Goddess, and so on — and because of this, from the outside, the tradition is commonly understood to be polytheistic. Simultaneously, however, adherents refer to the existence of one supreme God, whom they call Bhagavan (All-Opulent One), Paramatma (Supreme Self), Parameshwar (Supreme Controller), Parampita (Supreme Father), and so on. Thus, according to the philosophy of Krishna Consciousness, God is one, but also many. He/She manifests in innumerable forms and shapes and further expands into lesser divinities, and even into the entire perceivable world, which is where the idea of pantheism comes from.

This hierarchical series of divine manifestations, of spiritual separateness as opposed to oneness, is often neglected in Western scholarship (and even within certain Indic traditions, such as modern-day Hinduism) where it is generally taught that these manifestations are all the same, and that they somehow coalesce in a higher reality.

When people born in the West are confronted with Krishna Consciousness, or even Hinduism in general, with its many "gods," their minds generally resort to preconceived notions of polytheism in non-Abrahamic cultures worldwide. The idea of One Supreme Godhead appears very far away, and reconciliation seems impossible. What most people don't know is that the various religious traditions of the world can be categorized within the divisions of panchopasana, or the "five types of gods" worshipped in traditional Hinduism: Durga, Surya, Ganesh, Shiva, and Vishnu (i.e., Krishna). These five represent all the rest, and there are millions. It is this hierarchical categorization that we will explore in the remainder of this essay.

To begin, let us understand that the five primary gods and their numerous variations may be seen in three ways. First, they are alternate faces of one absolute reality, and they exist to assist Him/Her in

the administration of the universe. Second, their existence in this service allows them to manifest as separate beings, who indeed perform cosmic functions. Third, they also represent "categories" of religious practice that indicate specific levels of spiritual understanding, as mentioned above.

This third, lesser-known perspective was the insight of Bhaktivinoda Thakura (1838–1914), the great Nineteenth-century Vaishnava reformer. His view of Indic polytheism and how it interrelates with the standard monotheistic traditions with which we are more familiar is enlightening.

According to Bhaktivinoda, the initial quest for spirit, or Brahman, is a form of Shakta-dharma, for it is the recognition of Nature as divine. "There is more to what we see than meets the eye." Mother Nature is alive and fundamentally spiritual. In its most gross form, Shakta-dharma consists of worshipping prakriti, or material nature, but it can be as developed as the more sophisticated forms of Durga worship existing in India from time immemorial. Nonetheless, it is still a rudimentary form of spiritual awareness, with practitioners often still given to meat eating and other less savory materialistic activities. It is a beginning, a rudimentary awakening of spiritual awareness.

Bhaktivinoda writes, "The practices of Shaktaism are fit to give rise to the first transcendental aspirations of man. People engrossed in sensual development and apathetic towards seeking the Absolute Truth may be enticed by the practices and way of life of a Shakta, and in this way may be drawn closer to the highest object of life."

Then, when one's spiritual inclinations mature, they come to the realization that there is heat at center of all we see, feel, taste, touch, and smell. The Sun gives us life, nurturing us with warmth and light. Our digestion is a kind of fire that ignites our bodies with gusto, allowing us to move about in the material world. This is Saura-dharma. According to Bhaktivinoda, "When God consciousness grows stronger, the realization that heat is the preeminent power effecting all activities in the material world comes, and one rises to the second stage: the worship of the source of all heat, the sun (Suryadev)."

After this, however, one realizes that even this magnificent energy, great though it may be, is still just a mundane force, generated from and subsisting in the material world. Bhaktivinoda calls this higher realization Ganapatya-dharma, wherein one realizes that living beings hold the secret to higher spiritual reality. At this stage, a sort of awareness evolves that animated living entities are more important than energetic abstractions, and gods such as Ganesh and other creatures of nature rise to prominence as the object of one's worship. Such realization often manifests as the first seeds of humanism.

But this evolves further, and one realizes that all creatures indeed reach their pinnacle in man. As Bhaktivinoda writes, "The fourth stage is the worship of purely human consciousness in the form of Shiva — Shaiva-dharma." Here, one looks for an empowered personality, a more humanlike divinity with whom one can identify. The idea of becoming one with this divine embodiment becomes desirable, and spirituality here consists of "unitary recognition," of one's identity with all that is, and with the Supreme. In this way, Shaiva-dharma puts forward a sort of non-theistic spirituality, often focusing on monism, or even enhanced humanism, if with definite spiritual underpinnings.

Thus, having graduated from one level of spirituality to the next, Shaiva-dharma affords a glimpse into the actual nature of the Divine.

But there is a higher reality still. Bhaktivinoda reveals the culmination of the spiritual quest: "Coming to the fifth stage, an individual particle of consciousness — jiva (the soul) — serves the Personality of Supreme Consciousness. This stage is called Vaishnava-dharma, or Vaishnavism."

Bhaktivinoda further informs us that all of the world's major religions fall into one of these five categories, and that this is what Panchopasana, or the worship of various "Hindu" gods, is really all about.

Most folk religion, pantheism, Shamanism, Earth religion, Neopaganism, Gaia, Shintoism, Goddess worship, and so on — whatever the external designation — are likened to Shakta-dharma, as such traditions essentially recognize the divine in Nature.

Solar religion, manifestations of Saura-dharma, was popular in many ancient cultures, from India to Egypt, and still is. The earliest deities associated with the sun are Surya, Wadjet, Sekhmet, Hathor, Bast, Bat, and Menhit. The Aztecs of Mexico, as well as certain tribes of Africa, made Sun-worship famous, and all of this is included in Saura-dharma.

Ganesh worship is an in-between stage, not quite as basic as Shakta-dharma and Saura-dharma, but not yet theism proper. This level of realization can be found throughout the world as well, often in the form of humanism, wherein a spark of divinity is detected in one's fellow man. It is the seed of divine awareness. But this reaches its most mature form, Bhaktivinoda writes, in religions like

Buddhism and Jainism, for they are akin to Shaiva-dharma, with an emphasis more on psychological empowerment and fully awakened humanism, along with a type of philosophical monism. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, he further explains, are similar to Vaishnavism, since worship of the Supreme Godhead is the focus of these traditions.

However, Bhaktivinoda is quick to point out that there is a "mundane" Vaishnavism and a "spiritual" Vaishnavism as well. The first is called Baravahi ("those who carry the burden of external rituals") and the second is called Saragrahi ("those who drink the essence"). It is this latter form of Vaishnavism, naturally, which is lauded as the culmination of the religious quest. The former is merely a variety of Hinduism, on a par with other sectarian religions. Saragrahi Vaishnavism is the eternal function of the soul and the science of spirituality, and it is this that the great spiritual masters throughout history have encouraged devotees to embrace.

Bhaktivinoda sums up Panchopasana as follows:

> Therefore, those who are simply astonished by the powers of anything in the creation of the Lord, without any factual information of the Lord Himself, are known as shaktas, or worshipers of the great powers. The modern scientist is also captivated by the wonderful actions and reactions of natural phenomena and therefore is also a type of shakta. These lower-grade persons gradually rise to become sauriyas (worshippers of the Sun-god) or ganapatyas (worshippers of the mass of people as janata janardana or daridra-narayana, and so on, in the form of Ganapati) and then rise to the platform of worshiping Lord Shiva in search of the ever-existing soul and its identity with the Lord. After this one may graduate to the stage of worshipping Lord Vishnu, the Supersoul, whose highest form is that of Lord Krishna.

To highlight Krishna's supremacy and to indicate the secondary status of the demigods, Lord Brahma (who creates the material cosmos on behalf of Lord Vishnu) composed the treatise known as the Brahma-samhita. The Gaudiya Vaishnava saint Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakur, the son of Bhaktivinoda Thakur, writes in his commentary to this great work as follows:

> The Brahma-samhita has refuted Panchopasana [Hinduism's traditional worship of five main gods: Durga, Surya, Ganesh, Shiva, and Vishnu]… The worship of Vishnu as found in Panchopasana does not please Vishnu; it is heterodox and highly improper… The worship of Vishnu as one of the five deities makes His highest dignity, which is without any equal, similar to that of the other deities, and [in that system] His Lordship is counted as one of several deities, which is a great spiritual offense. . . . It is the eternal duty of all jivas [living beings] to serve [only] Krishna [or His alternate form as Vishnu], the Lord of all Lords. All other deities are His servitors. Their function is only to carry out His commands. They will never acquire liberation who conceive of the deities as the different names and bodies of Vishnu instead of knowing them as His servitors. Thus, five shlokas of the Brahma-samhita have described the natures of the five deities . . .: (1) "I (i.e., Brahma) adore the primeval Lord Govinda [also known as Krishna], in pursuance of whose order the Sun-god [Surya], the king of the planets and the eye of this world, performs his journey mounting the wheel of time. (2) I adore the primeval Lord Govinda, whose lotus-like feet are always held by Ganesh on his head in order to obtain power for his function of destroying all the obstacles of the three worlds. (3) I adore the primeval Lord Govinda, in accordance with whose will Durga, His external potency, conducts her function as the creating, preserving, and destroying agent of the world. (4) I adore the primeval Lord Govinda, who transforms Himself as Shambhu [Shiva] for performing the work of destruction, just as milk is transformed into curd, which is neither the same as, nor different from, milk. (5) I adore the primeval Lord Govinda, who manifests Himself as Vishnu in the same manner as one burning candle communicates its light to another candle which, though existing separately, is of the same quality as the first."

In conclusion, then, the many gods associated with Krishna Consciousness are living beings — cosmic administrators — in their own right. But they also have an accessible and down-to-earth function as representatives of universal religious categories. Through Bhaktivinoda's lens, they offer a hierarchical understanding of how one gradually evolves in consciousness, from the dawn of spiritual awakening to the perfection of spiritual life.

When Shiva Became a Diva: The Story of an All-Too-Misunderstood Divinity

A diva is usually defined as a woman who sings well or, alternatively, as one who is difficult to deal with — we won't touch that with a ten-foot pole. Instead, we look at Shiva, who, at one point, was something of a diva himself. In his many exploits as described in Puranic texts, one could easily detect his mellifluous song, as he glorifies the Supreme Personality of Godhead, Krishna, while beating on his drum. And difficult to deal with? This is practically his middle name. He is the lord of destruction, causing untold distress to his devotees, while inciting their devotion. He wears a necklace of skulls and carries a snake in one hand and a trident in the other — a fearful image, indeed. But, a "woman?" That will be the focus of this article: After a somewhat thorough explanation of just who Shiva is, according to original Sanskrit literature, we will explore how Shiva became a woman.

Introducing Lord Shiva

Famous as the ash-covered ascetic, the prince of the yogis, Shiva is one of the most widely-worshipped deities in India. With names such as Mahadeva ("the great god") and Nataraja ("the king of dancers"), Shiva ("the auspicious one") is venerated in ancient holy cities such as Varanasi, where his worshippers devote their lives to him. Despite these common conceptions of him, the following verse from the scriptures explains his overall position in relation to divinity: "...[T]he Ganga is the greatest of all rivers, Lord Achyuta (Krishna) the best among deities, and Lord Shambhu (Shiva) the greatest Vaishnava..." (Srimad Bhagavatam 12.13.16)

However, Shaivites (his worshippers) regard him not just as the greatest devotee, but as God Himself. There is a basis for this in scripture. As Lord Vishnu Himself (Lord Krishna's primary expansion, non-different from His very essence) explains in the Bhagavatam (4.7.50): "Brahma, Lord Shiva, and I are the supreme cause of the material manifestation. I am the Supersoul, the self-sufficient witness. But impersonally there is no difference between Brahma, Lord Shiva, and Me." In other words, all three divinities are one because they are all avataras, or descents of the Supreme for the purpose of creation, maintenance, and annihilation. In this context they are known as guna-avataras and preside over the modes of passion (embodied by Brahma, the creator), goodness (embodied by Vishnu, the maintainer), and ignorance (embodied by Shiva, the destroyer). All three personalities are considered various aspects of the same Godhead.

The Mahabharata (Anushasana-parva 135) also says that Vishnu and Shiva are non-different, and even counts the names Shiva, Sharva, Sthanu, Ishana, and Rudra — names traditionally identified with Shiva — among the thousand names of Vishnu. Such identification between Shiva and the Supreme Lord, Vishnu, has led many to believe that all the gods mentioned in the Vedic literature are one. However, a close study of scripture reveals that, while there is reason to see Shiva as not different from Vishnu, there is also reason to distinguish between them.

According to the Bhagavad Gita, which is accepted by all classes of transcendentalists in India, including Vaishnavas and Shaivites, Vishnu (Krishna) is the Ultimate Godhead, before whom even Shiva must bow down. Krishna identifies Himself as the source of all material and spiritual worlds (10.8), and Arjuna confirms that Krishna is supreme (10.12). Indeed, Vishnu's (and thus Krishna's) supremacy is clearly defined as far back as the Rig Veda: "The lotus feet of Vishnu are the supreme objective of all the demigods. These lotus feet of the Lord are as enlightening as the sun in the sky." (Rig Veda Samhita 1.22.20)

Commenting on Srimad Bhagavatam (3.9.16), Srila Prabhupada says, "The Lord expands Himself into three — Vishnu, Brahma, and Shiva — for maintenance, creation, and destruction, respectively. Of the three principal agents controlling the three modes of material nature, Vishnu is the Almighty; even though He is within material nature for the purpose of maintenance, He is not controlled by the laws of material nature. The other two, Brahma and Shiva, although almost as greatly powerful as Vishnu, are within the control of the material energy of the Supreme Lord."

Subservient to God

As someone who is extremely powerful and yet under the control of the material energy, Shiva is clearly not God proper, and so Vaishnavas consider him a demigod, or someone empowered by God for a specific purpose. His subservience to Vishnu, God Himself, should be clear: there are countless stories in the Vedic literature indicating Shiva's lesser position as Vishnu's devotee. For example, there is the story of Vrikasura, a demon who practiced severe austerities and then asked Shiva for a boon: the power to kill at once any living being whose head Vrikasura merely touched. Shiva granted the boon, but was soon to regret his decision, for Vrika came after him to try out the newfound power. Lord Shiva ran to all parts of the universe to escape this power-mad devotee, and finally ended up at the door of Vishnu's kingdom.

Hearing the words of a frightened Shiva, Vishnu devised a plan to help him. In accordance with this plan, Vishnu appeared directly before Vrikasura and told him that Shiva was not to be trusted. "Shiva is fond of joking and even lying," said Vishnu. "I am sure he is not telling you the truth. He was just teasing you. Touch your own head, and you will see that nothing will happen."

Vrika, of course, touched his own head and died. But the point of this story, in the present context, is Vishnu's superiority over Shiva, who could not resolve the problem on his own. After racing through the entire material cosmos to escape Vrikasura, Shiva sought refuge in Vishnu, the Supreme Personality of Godhead.

Nonetheless, Shaivites tend to see Shiva not only as the greatest devotee but also as God himself. Vaishnavas can accommodate this by highlighting the texts mentioned above, which indicate a certain oneness between Shiva and God — but he is never God in all His fullness.

To clarify Shiva's position according to traditional Vaishnavism, the Brahma-Samhita (5.45) offers an analogy: "When milk is transformed by acids into yogurt, the yogurt is neither the same as nor different from the original milk. I adore the primeval Lord Govinda [Krishna, Vishnu], of whom Lord Shiva is such a transformation, specifically for performing the work of destruction."

Though milk and yogurt are essentially non-different, yogurt is a product of milk. One can use milk to make clarified butter (ghee), cheese, ice cream, or yogurt, but one cannot turn yogurt into milk. Clearly, then, Shiva's divinity is intimately connected with, even dependent upon, his relationship to Vishnu.

So, according to Vaishnava theology, Shiva is both God and yet different from God as well. Because of Shiva's intimate contact with the quality of ignorance and with matter (which is innately ignorant), the living beings in this world cannot receive the same spiritual restoration by worshipping him as they do by worshipping Vishnu.

When Shiva Became a Diva

But what does all of this have to do with Shiva as a woman? Here is the basic story as retold in the scriptures:

Lord Shiva wanted to become a gopi, to enter Lord Krishna's Rasa Dance — the esoteric round dance of love, experienced by God in His intimate form as Krishna along with His most intimate devotees, the gopis, simple cowherd girls who love Him more than life itself. So for many years he performed austerities, until Paurnamasi Yogamaya, the embodiment of spiritual energy, became pleased with him. At that time, he expressed his inner longing: he prayed to join Krishna's Rasa-lila. Paurnamasi oversaw the mystical transformation, dipping him in the holy lake known as Brahma-kunda. Spiritual alchemy worked its magic, and he immediately assumed the form of a teenage gopi. With his new body, he went to the place where Rasa-lila was being performed, and hid there in a grove.

Krishna and the gopis sensed that someone with a different mood was in proximity. They looked at each other and asked, "Why does the mood seem compromised today? What's the problem?" After searching the entire area, they discovered the new gopi and asked her a plethora of questions, "Who are you? What is your name? Who are your parents? What is your husband's name? Where is your in-laws' house?"

Shiva faltered. He couldn't reply. His identity as a girl was contrived, without familial or social background. What could he say to them? Feeling out of his element and regretful of his plight, he began to cry, "Yogamaya, Yogamaya, please save me. I will never again come to Vrindavana to join the Rasa-lila. One must be very special or spiritually advanced to come here. I am not worthy…" Diva, indeed!

Just then, Paurnamasi arrived, and she requested the gopis to show Lord Shiva special mercy.

"'She' is an object of my affection," Paurnamasi told them. Vouched for by the very emblem of spiritual energy, the gopis accepted Shiva as a gopi and Krishna named her Gopishvara (she whose ishvaras, controllers, are the gopis). He blessed her to become the guard of the Rasa-lila and said, "Without the sanction of Gopishvara, no one will be able to enter the Rasa-lila."

Today, there is a beautiful deity and temple in Vrindavana commemorating this event, but that is another story.

Narada Muni: The Father of Bhakti-yoga

Narada Muni is exalted in Vedic texts as one of the twelve mahajanas, or great authorities on eternal truth. Details of his life and teachings are recounted in the Narada Purana, the Padma Purana, and throughout Srimad Bhagavatam. So advanced is his level of spirituality that in these texts he is even sometimes called Bhagavan, a term usually reserved for the Supreme Lord, and in the Bhagavad Gita (10.26), Lord Krishna Himself says, "Of the sages among the demigods, I am Narada."

As a preeminent representative of God, Narada Muni is often considered the original spiritual master. Srila Prabhupada states in his commentary to the Srimad Bhagavatam (6.5.22), "The immediate spiritual master is the representative of Narada Muni; there is no difference between the instructions of Narada Muni and those of the present spiritual master." Prabhupada further refers to Narada as "the father of devotional service." (6.16.26) ISKCON devotees know Narada Muni as "the eternal spiritual spaceman," because he is described throughout the Vedic literature as a transcendental mystic who received from Krishna the ability to traverse the cosmos, delivering the Hare Krishna maha-mantra to sincere souls and instigating advancement on the spiritual path. "Instigating" may seem the wrong word to describe a celestial sage, but Narada is famous for pushing people to the limit, forcing them to make decisions that enable them to advance in spiritual life.

Narada also serves as an instigator in Lord Krishna's pastimes. One example occurs around the time of Krishna's birth. When the demon Kamsa hears a voice from the sky, telling him that Devaki's eighth child, Krishna, will kill him, it is Narada who instills Kamsa with fear that any of Devaki's children might be his enemy. Narada thereby persuades Kamsa to kill all of Devaki's children. Narada does this to accelerate Krishna's appearance and enhance Kamsa's reputation as a demon, causing Krishna to eventually kill him and establish righteousness in society. (This was all done under the Lord's mysterious internal potency. Later, Lord Krishna brought the children back to life.)

Another example of Narada's instigative powers is seen in his exchange with Princess Rukmini, to whom he elaborately describes Krishna's unsurpassed beauty and superlative qualities. Upon hearing Narada's description, Rukmini becomes infatuated with Krishna, giving her heart to Him in total surrender. She is thus unable to marry Shishupala, to whom she was promised. Narada's "meddling" leads to the unfolding of an important episode in Krishna's manifest pastimes: Shishupala is humbled, and Krishna kidnaps and marries Rukmini. In the fulfillment of her heart's desire, Rukmini serves Krishna as His loving wife in the spiritual realm.

In yet another important episode, Narada chides Vyasadeva for not getting at the essence of Vedic knowledge in compiling the Vedic literature. Narada tells Vyasadeva that the remedy is to describe in his writing the name, form, fame, and pastimes of Krishna. Vyasadeva does so, the result being the Srimad Bhagavatam, the cream of ancient India's scriptural legacy.

The Three Lives of Narada

Just who is Narada Muni, and what did he go through to become one of the most respected saints in the Vedic tradition? The Srimad Bhagavatam describes how Narada attained the audience of God and thus became renowned in the Vedic tradition. The story begins with his previous two lifetimes. During the first, his name was Upabarhana, a Gandharva, or singer from a heavenly planet. Upabarhana's beautiful voice and handsome features made him attractive to women, and he became a playboy, losing his spiritual perspective and falling into materialistic life. Once, Upabarhana attended a festival put on by the prajapatis, residents of higher planets responsible for populating the universe. While performing sankirtana, the congregational chanting of the holy names of the Lord, Upabarhana glorified the demigods. The devotees present took this action as a great offense, because sankirtana is meant for glorifying only the Supreme Lord. The devotees then cursed Upabarhana to be born in his next life as a Shudra (laborer) devoid of beauty.

Fortunately, whether a saint blesses or curses, the result is the same: the recipient of the saint's attention advances in God consciousness. That is what eventually happened to Upabarhana (Narada). When he was born as the son of a maidservant, he was inclined to devotional service and managed to serve the pure devotees of the Lord. Narada's pious mother had the good fortune to serve traveling mendicants, so five-year-old Narada had the same opportunity. Moreover, he was able to take the remnants of their meals (prasadam) and hear them speak on transcendental subjects. Primarily these two activities, says the Bhagavatam, enabled Narada to move forward in his spiritual evolution. The

traveling mendicants could not find any fault in the little boy. He seemed to be uninterested in playing like other boys; he was not naughty in any way, nor did he speak more than necessary. For all of these reasons, the sages showered their blessings upon him. Narada underwent a vital transformation and became intoxicated with God consciousness. He meditated day and night, and then left home, after his mother's death, to become a wandering mendicant himself.

As Narada traveled, he learned to dedicate every moment to the pursuit of spiritual realization. One day, during Narada's meditation, the Lord appeared within his heart — he was able to see the form of God. Tears of love flowed from his eyes as he gazed upon the Lord's beautiful form. And then the Lord disappeared from his vision. The Bhagavatam describes Narada's grief-stricken condition and tells us that as much as he tried, he could not regain his vision of God. His realization: God is not at our beck and call. He appears before us by His sweet will, and if He desires to conceal Himself, no amount of meditation or prayer will force Him to show us His beautiful form. As Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati Thakura, Srila Prabhupada's spiritual master, has said, "Don't ask to see God, but rather act in such a way that God will want to see you." Narada then heard the Lord's voice, telling him that it is not possible to see God if one is not completely pure. The Lord told Narada another thing: He had shown Narada His form out of kindness and to increase his longing for Him.

The Lord's enticement worked. Narada now meditated on the form of the Lord more intensely than ever before. His hearing and chanting of the glories of Krishna engulfed his soul, and he became oblivious of the world around him. When his moment of death came, he was ready. "Being freed from all material taints," Narada told his disciple Vyasadeva, "I met with death just as lightning and illumination occur simultaneously." The transition was seamless. The universe Narada had inhabited eventually reached the end of its natural cycle and was destroyed, to be replaced by another one, in accordance with the doctrine of cycles in the material cosmos.

This time, Narada was born from the creator-god Brahma's heart, as his most dear son. In this form, Narada had indeed reached perfection. The Bhagavatam tells us that his birth was not forced, as are most births in the material realm, but was completely voluntary: he was born merely to assist the Lord in His mission. Moreover, says the Bhagavatam, his body was just like the Lord's: transcendental and immortal, with no difference between his outer body and the inner animating spark, the soul.

Teacher of Pure Devotion

Thus, Narada is considered a perfect devotee. His teachings, found throughout the Srimad Bhagavatam as well as in his Narada-bhakti-sutras and Narada Pancharatra, are exemplary for souls on the path of pure devotion. They embody the essence of bhakti-yoga, selfless devotional service. Lord Krishna, feeling grateful for Narada's dedication and love, once asked him, "What can I do to serve you?" "I do not care where I may be," Narada replied, "but I pray that I may be allowed to constantly remember Your lotus feet." This single-minded determination marks Narada as the perfect guru, and many great sages have taken shelter at his feet. He is the spiritual master of Valmiki (the author of the Ramayana), and of Prahlada Maharaja, Dhruva Maharaja, the Pracetas, Chitraketu, and many other prominent personalities in Vedic history. Most important, he is the spiritual master of Vyasadeva, often considered the model guru. For this reason, Narada Muni is the guru of gurus.

Traveling Musician of the Soul

Narada is a perfect brahmachari, a celibate whose sole purpose is pure devotional service to the Lord. The Linga Purana says that Krishna awarded Narada a vina, a stringed musical instrument, which Narada plays as he traverses the universe. Because the vina was a direct gift from the Lord, it is considered non-different from Him. Narada, then, carries the Lord with him as he travels the material cosmos, delivering the holy name to the devotees and helping those in need with his spiritual blessings.

Because Narada is a musician who travels throughout the universe enlightening people with Krishna Consciousness, it was fitting that during Lord Krishna's appearance five hundred years ago as Lord Chaitanya, Narada appeared as Srivasa Thakura. It was in his courtyard, Srivasa Angan, that the sankirtana movement, full of song and dance, began on Earth. In this way, both as Narada and as Srivasa, he uses music, particularly the chanting of the maha-mantra: Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna, Hare Hare/ Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare, to spread the glories of the

Supreme.

Narada Becomes a Gopi

According to the Narada Purana (2.80.9–32), the Skanda Purana (2.6.2–3), and the Padma Purana (4.75.25–46), when Narada first heard that Lord Krishna had appeared in Vrindavana, he wandered Vrindavana's twelve forests looking for any signs of his beloved Lord. With great intensity, he ran through the secret bowers in which Krishna would meet with the gopis, His cowherd girlfriends. But he could not find any evidence of Krishna's appearance. Vrinda Devi, a prominent gopi who helps arrange Krishna's rendezvous with His girlfriends, appeared before Narada and told him that, to see such esoteric pastimes, he would have to adopt the mood and form of a loving gopi himself. This was possible, she said, only for the most advanced practitioners of spiritual life. Vrinda Devi told Narada that he was one such soul and could affect such a change by bathing in a nearby pond known as Kusum Sarovara. Narada did as Vrinda Devi had instructed, emerging from the waters as a gopi named Naradi. He was thus able to see Vrindavana with new eyes and enter into Krishna's pastimes with the cowherd girls. Later, Vrinda Devi instructed him to bathe in another pond, which came to be known as Narada-kunda, and he resumed his male form.

The Narada Purana says that the lesson to be learned from this episode is that even a sage as great as Narada must meditate on Vrindavana in the intense mood of a gopi to attain the highest level of prema, love for Krishna. Such meditation is possible for only the most accomplished devotees.

Blind Visionaries: The Twin Lives of Bilvamangala Thakur and Surdas

For years now, I had assumed that the popular Indian poster of baby Krishna, sitting playfully with an old sadhu with a long, white tuft of hair on the back of his head (shikha), smiling devilishly, depicts Bilvamangala Thakur, the blind Thirteenth-century poet-saint who wrote the Krishna-karnamrita, a classic text on love for Krishna.

But I recently found out that it is someone else in the picture. I happened to be in an Indian grocery store with a friend of mine who is now considered one of the world's leading authorities on Surdas, the blind Sixteenth-century bard whose life in many ways parallels that of Bilvamangala. "No," he said. "This is a blind Krishna poet, alright. But it's not Bilvamangala." He claimed it was the poet who is now his field of expertise.

Not really satisfied (who likes to be mistaken for so many years?), I quickly visited an old friend, an early disciple of Srila Prabhupada. He will know for certain, I thought.

As I brought the picture before my Godbrother, he laughed. "Yes, I asked Prabhupada about that print," he said.

"What did he say?" I asked, hardly able to contain myself.

"He said that it was a picture of Surdas and Krishna, but when I pressed him, mentioning Bilvamangala Thakura, he said, 'Why not? Blind poet. It can be either one. Their pastimes are like twins.'"

Pastimes are like twins? I decided I had to look into their lives to see what Prabhupada was referring to.

Bilvamangala and Surdas

Bilvamangala was one of the few poets Lord Chaitanya enjoyed listening to when He was in heightened states of spiritual ecstasy. The bard went by other names, too, such as Lilashuka. Shuka means "parrot," and the name was given to him by his guru Somagiri because of the mellifluous way in which he described the loving lila, or playful sports, of Sri Krishna, the Supreme Personality of Godhead.

According to traditional biographies, he is said to have existed centuries before the Thirteenth century, which is the date accepted by scholars, but it is also said that he lived for 700 years, which does not make dating his earthly sojourn any easier. He was among the chief disciples of Vishnusvami, one of the great teachers of the Rudra Sampradaya, a traditional Vaishnava lineage.

From his writings, it is clear that he was initially given to the impersonalistic understanding of Adi Shankara (circa Eighth century). In other words, he viewed God as formless and the goal of life as merging into God's essential being. Under the patronage of King Kulashekhara of Kerala, however, Vaishnavism, or the view of the Supreme as being a person, was gaining in popularity, and the original Vedic version — that God is the Supreme Being and that our raison d'être is to serve Him, not to merge into Him — was again rising to the fore. Bilvamangala caught onto this conception, and became one of its most outstanding representatives.

Krishnadasa Kaviraja Goswami (Sixteenth century), the author of the Chaitanya Charitamrita, by way of explaining the first verse of Bilvamangala's most famous work, tells us that the author was first given to worldly attachments; then he cultivated kevala-jnana, or contemplation of the impersonal Brahman, as mentioned above; finally, he became a great devotee of Lord Krishna.

Born in a Brahmin family in South India, he lived on the eastern bank of the holy river Krishna-Venna. His learning was the stuff of legends, but in his previous life, though he made tremendous spiritual advancement, he was unduly attached to sex life. This tendency carried over into his current incarnation. Accordingly, as Bilvamangala, he reached a certain point in his spiritual evolution, and then had an illicit sexual liaison with a dancing girl, who was a well-to-do musician and harlot named Chintamani.

Passionate Determination

This Chintamani, it seems, lived on the opposite bank of the river, and so, with great determination, he used to visit her on a nightly basis. He was so devoted to this prostitute, it is said, that even when he was performing his father's death ceremony (shraddha), he told the priests, "Make

haste! I have to go."

On that particular night, in fact, he had to undergo especially severe austerities to get to her home. It was a terribly stormy night, and to get across the river would be even more difficult than usual. But this could not sway him. He came to the bank of the Krishna-Venna, as was his custom, and, finding no boat, risked his life to cross the terrible river, with waves now crashing all around him. He began swimming across the raging current. In the meantime, the prostitute Chintamani thought, "It is so late, and raining so hard. Surely Bilvamangala will not come in such conditions, even to see me." So she bolted the door and retired to her bedroom.

As she snuggled up in her warm bed, poor Bilvamangala was drowning in the middle of the fierce river. He desperately grabbed onto what he thought was a log. When he finally reached the shore, he discovered that it was actually a corpse! Unconcerned in the least, he quickly proceeded to the door of his beloved's house. But, much to his disappointment, he found the gate bolted from within. He shouted her name with all his might, but it was to no avail. His cries were camouflaged by the deafening thunder, boisterous winds and torrential rains beating down on the windows and walls. What could be done? In his passion to see his lover, nothing could dissuade him.

The walls were too high for him to scale. Still, he tried. Having nothing else to hold on to, he seized the tail of a snake, which clung to the wall, and succeeded in leaping over, but fell heavily to the ground on the other side. The loud thump brought Chintamani to the spot, where she saw the pitiable Bilvamangala in a wretched condition.

She carried him into the room and nursed him tenderly as he hung between life and death. Observing his mad love for her, she was reminded of truths she had heard in her youth, such as that love of such power is actually meant for God. Inspired, she looked at him and shouted, "What a great fool you are! Shame on your learning! I am always conscious of my own wicked life and profession, but you are totally in the dark about who you actually are. Had you been attached to God in the way you are to me, you would have been an angel."

The Clarion Call of Truth

Her words rang true for young Bilvamangala. So inspiring they were, he immediately resolved to change the course of his life, moving headlong into spiritual concerns. With this, she, too, renounced the world, giving up all her ill-acquired fortunes, and she became Bilvamangala's Vartma-pradarshaka guru, or the guru who initially shows one the way to the highest well being.

The very next day, he renounced the world and started for Vrindavana, the land of Lord Krishna. But even on the way to Vrindavana, he saw another beautiful woman, the wife of a Brahmin, and became enamored by her. Losing sight of his newfound spiritual determination, he began following this lovely Brahmini, hoping to attract her attention. cleverly, she led him to her respectable family, and Bilvamangala came into their house. The woman immediately went to her husband, saying, "This man is following me. Please discern his intentions."

The Brahmin addressed Bilvamangala, "My dear sir, you appear to be a very nice gentleman, a renunciant. From your appearance I can understand that you come from an aristocratic family as well. Why are you following my wife?"

"Because I want to embrace her," Bilvamangala replied.

"Come then, I will arrange for you to attain your goal," the Brahmin announced. Then he explained to his wife that had a plan. "Here is a guest, and he wants to embrace and kiss you. Decorate yourself nicely so that he might enjoy your beauty." The wife did as her husband asked, and when Bilvamangala came before the woman, seeing how accommodating both she and her gentle husband were, he again realized what a fool he was.

He resolved to make a permanent solution to his problem, and asked the Brahmini, "My dear mother [a term of deep respect], will you kindly give me a pin from your hair?" Although bewildered by his request, she took a pin from her beautiful locks and handed it to him. He then took that pin and pierced out his own eyes, saying, "These eyes are my enemies! May they now look only upon Krishna." While the tradition does not encourage ordinary folk to adopt such drastic measures, the story is meant to show the intensity of his determination, and this particular saint's remedy for his relentless affliction.

Seeing Krishna

He then continued towards Vrindavana, and as he neared its holy precincts, a young boy, seeing the difficulty that the now-blind Bilvamangala was enduring, took his hand and began leading him the rest of the way. The blind bard soon realized that it was Krishna Himself. As they grew ever closer to Vrindavana, Krishna pulled away from his hand. “I have to go now. My mother is calling me. If I don’t go now and take my lunch, she’ll be very angry.”

“No, you can’t go,” Bilvamangala said. “I won’t let you.” But Krishna got away. He somehow managed to pull His hand out of Bilvamangala’s, who then called after Krishna, “You can pull your hand from mine, but you cannot take Yourself from my heart. I have imprisoned you there.”

He then made a place for himself in Brahma-ghat, a holy place in Vrindavan, to perform austerities for the balance of his life. One day, however, Krishna again came to Bilvamangala. “My dear sir,” He addressed the blind renunciant, “Why are you living so humbly, practicing such severe austerities? Why don’t you take some milk?”

“Who are You, my dear boy?” Bilvamangala inquired. “I am a cowherd boy,” Krishna replied. “If you like, I can supply you with milk every day.” Bilvamangala agreed, and from then on, Krishna brought him a small supply of milk daily.

It is said that Bilvamangala remained at Brahma-kund for 700 years and performed tapashya, or penance. When he would sing his sweet songs about Krishna, that singing would drag Krishna to the spot almost immediately. Krishna would not be able to concentrate on what he was doing, and he would leave everything and go to where Bilvamangala was singing His glories. Krishna would come and sit in front of him and listen, as in the painting.

Twins of a Fashion

Surdas’s story is not as colorful as Bilvamangala’s, and it is of less interest to adherents of the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition. Bilvamangala is our Surdas. There are other distinctions between the two poets: Surdas’ poetry was in the proto-Hindi language of Brij Bhasha, while Bilvamangala wrote in Sanskrit. Surdas was congenitally blind, as opposed to Bilvamangala, whose attraction to the opposite sex and his determination to overcome that attraction is what caused his blindness. While Sur’s magnum opus is the Sur Sagar (“Ocean of Melody”), Bilvamangala is known for the Krishna-karnamrta, though both works overlap and share much in common. They both speak of overcoming all obstacles to surrender to Krishna, and that the sweetest love is found at His lotus feet.

The confluence of these poetic traditions has made many a historian wonder about the overlap. Just who is borrowing from whom? After all, Bilvamangala’s extraordinarily lengthy life — 700 years, according to most hagiographic records — would allow the borrowing to go either way. Or are there really two stories here after all? Should they be conflated into one? In fact, the two have flowed into each other in numerous Bhaktamals, or devotional biographies of the Seventeenth century, and they even merge triumphantly in film and comic book adaptations. People cannot seem to get it straight. Sometimes, Sur’s story is told with a little extra masala (spice) — that is, there is a woman involved, like in the Bilvamangala version, and it is said that his blindness comes as a result of his lust. Other times, Bilvamangala is born blind, like Sur, and verses from the Sur Sagar are attributed to him.

Interestingly, Sur (sura) means “Sun” (in Sanskrit, surya), the intense light of which has caused much blindness in India. And it is because Sur the poet was known by that name that it has come to refer, colloquially, to blind people in general, especially those who happen to be somewhat saintly. This could also account for the occasional conflation of the two poets. Perhaps this is also why Prabhupada seemed unconcerned about their distinct identities.

The basic thing to remember, it seems, is that there’s a certain bhava, or emotion, to these stories, and to the poetry — and that is that love of Krishna is the goal of life. Both Bilvamangala and Sur sing of a beautiful Lord with large lotus eyes and a dark blue complexion; raven-black hair that curls about His ears, sometimes falling into His face; a bewitching smile, and a collection of flutes that conspire to make beautiful music.

There is something else to learn from their stories, too. They are meant to provoke thought, to inspire us to contemplate a particular question: what, exactly, does it mean to be blind? When we look at Dhritarashtra, the evil king mentioned in the Bhagavad Gita, we are confronted with true blindness. Indeed, as Prabhupada tells us, “Dhritarashtra was blind from birth.” He continues, “Unfortunately, he was also bereft of spiritual vision.” (BG 1.2) Here is the distinction between this particular King and the two poets in question. Prabhupada would never think of these three as triplets, since Bilvamangala and Surdas were great devotees, and Dhritarashtra knew a different blindness

altogether. This, it must be said, is why Prabhupada viewed Bilvamangala and Sur as twins — and as visionaries who pave the way for all aspiring devotees.

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Princes, Pandits, and Proverbs: The Sayings of Chanakya Pandita

When an old college friend told me he would be teaching a course in proverbs at a prominent school in New York City, I immediately began to think about how I might assist him. Since his major had been English literature, he was always ready to come to my rescue when I needed help preparing a college lecture on Krishna Consciousness or doing research for a literary project. Now I might be able to return the favor.

He had trepidation about his new course, and asked me whether the Vedic tradition offered any insights into the nature of proverbs. In response, I asked him to first explain exactly what he meant by "proverbs." He told me that a proverb is an adage, a simple, short saying that sums up a profound truth.

At first, I thought of the Vedanta-sutra, terse codes that express deep philosophical wisdom. But as my friend continued to speak, citing well-known proverbs and their authors, such as Confucius and Lao Tzu, I realized that the works of Chanakya Pandita, whom Srila Prabhupada quoted in almost every volume he produced, could more fittingly be called proverbs.

Srila Prabhupada often used Chanakya's sayings, which are revered throughout the Indian subcontinent, to illustrate Krishna conscious ideas. For instance, in the Srimad Bhagavatam (1.13.15, purport), Srila Prabhupada cites Chanakya's advice that valid moral instruction should be accepted even if given by a low-born or unqualified person. Even if gold is covered by stool, says Chanakya, it is still gold.

Srila Prabhupada taught that Chanakya, a great sage who lived three centuries before Christ, was a Brahmin, a wise man — he even referred to him as a saint. Although Srila Prabhupada once pointed out that Chanakya was not, strictly speaking, a pure Vaishnava, from Srila Prabhupada's writings it is clear that he had great respect for the Pandita's wisdom.

The more I told my friend about Chanakya, the more we both realized that Chanakya's works would add immensely to his proverbs course. Yet my knowledge of Chanakya Pandita as a historical personality left a great deal to be desired. For me, he was mostly an abstraction, a legendary soothsayer my spiritual master frequently quoted. To really help my friend, I needed to do some homework.

We went to the New York Public Library on 42nd Street to research Chanakya's life and times. Chanakya Pandita, we discovered, is commonly known to historians as Kautilya (although he is also known as Vishnugupta and Vatsyayana.) Beyond having composed volumes of proverbs, Chanakya is famous for his Artha-shastra (Treatise on Political Economy) and for counseling King Chandragupta Maurya, one of Alexander the Great's chief adversaries.

Chandragupta is known as Sandrocottus to Greek historians, and he is the founder of the Mauryan dynasty. In the early part of his career, he wandered the Punjab and, along with his countrymen, opposed Alexander's conquering forces. History records that it was Chandragupta's chief adviser, Chanakya Pandita, who was actually responsible for the King's ultimate victory. In The Minister's Signet Ring, a work of the Sixth century CE that purports to describe the last stages of Chandragupta's triumph over Alexander and the Nanda princes, the King himself is depicted as a weak and insignificant youth; the real ruler of the empire was Chanakya.

In 321 BCE, Chandragupta conquered Magadha (South Bihar). He proceeded to annex various parts of northern India and campaigned against the Greek Selsucus Nicator, a former general under Alexander. Under Chanakya's wise council, Chandragupta ruled for 24 years. The Mauryan Empire, however, lasted some 120 years more, being led first by its founding father's son, Bindusara, and then by his grandson, the famous Emperor Ashoka, who eventually converted to Buddhism.

During the reign of Chandragupta (321-297 BCE), Chanakya Pandita became widely known for his wisdom and scriptural knowledge. He was a simple and austere man, and deeply religious as well. A contemporary of Aristotle, who was summoned to Macedon to teach Alexander the Great, Chanakya is sometimes compared to the great Greek philosopher, and at other times he has been compared to Machiavelli, for his Artha-shastra has many similarities to The Prince. Aristotle and Chanakya also have common attitudes toward republican forms of government.

The most amazing thing about Chandragupta and Chanakya Pandita, my friend and I were soon to find out, was that both of them were predicted in the Srimad Bhagavatam (12.1.11-12), which was compiled almost 2,500 years before their time:

nava nandän dvijaù kaçcit
prapannän uddhariñyati
teñäà abhäve jagatéà
mauryä bhokñyanti vai kalau

"A certain Brahmin [Chanakya] will betray the trust of King Nanda and his eight sons and will destroy their dynasty. In their absence, the Mauryas will rule the world as the age of Kali continues."

sa eva candraguptaà vai
dvijo räjye 'bhiñekñyati
tat-suto värisäras tu
tataç cäçokavardhanaù

"This Brahmin will enthrone Chandragupta, whose son will be named Varisara. [Bindusara]. The son of Varisara will be Ashokavardhana. [Emperor Ashoka]."

These ancient Sanskrit verses fully predict the essential history of the Maurya dynasty, mentioning Chandragupta and his descendants by name. Although Chanakya is not specifically named, there is a clear inference, and Vaishnava commentators, such as Sridhara Swami, Vishvanatha Chakravarti Thakura, and, currently, Hridayananda dasa Goswami, say his identification with the Brahmin alluded to in this text is inescapable.

A great Krishna conscious teacher of the modern age, Srila Bhaktivinoda Thakura (1838-1914), also found this period in history to be of importance, perhaps owing to the scriptural predictions about it. In 1857-58, he composed a two-part English-language epic entitled Poried, which he intended to complete in twelve volumes. These two books, written in lucid, melodious English verse, described the wanderings of Porus, who challenged Alexander the Great and was eventually defeated by him. According to the late, prominent Indologist A. L. Basham, Porus's name derives from Paurava, which would connect him with the Kuru dynasty, the family upon which the Mahabharata centers. Bhaktivinoda Thakura's work details the story of Porus and its relation to Chandragupta and Chanakya Pandita. The first of his two published volumes on this subject can today be found at the British Museum in London.

The Pandita's Proverbs

In the Oriental Division of the huge 42nd Street library, my friend and I found the Chanakya-niti-darpanam, a collection of Chanakya's most famous proverbs. Here are ten of my favorites:

1. "An intelligent person moves on one foot while standing on the other. One should not abandon his previous position without having duly considered a superior position." I really liked this quote because it reminded me of my early years in Krishna Consciousness. Before becoming a devotee, I wanted to be sure that life in Krishna Consciousness was everything the devotees said it was. After all, if I was to practice the regulative principles of spiritual life, I wanted to be sure that I was getting something even better in return. So I chanted, read Srila Prabhupada's books, and associated with devotees. In this way, I "duly considered" the superior position of Krishna Consciousness.
2. "One becomes liberated by knowledge, not by shaving the head." Krishna Consciousness is not superficial. Chanakya seeks to warn his audience not to be mere showbottle renunciants. If a man is going to shave his head (generally a sign of renunciation), he should do it for the right reasons. In addition, Chanakya was not deprecating the shaving of one's head; he himself sported the shaved head and shikha, the tuft of hair in the back. A shaven head, while external, can be a reflection of one's internal Krishna Consciousness.
3. "What good will it do if a fool studies the scriptures? What good is it for a blind person to use a mirror?" Again, superficiality is rejected. This is perhaps Chanakya's most endearing quality, at least from my perspective. He is not content that someone shaves his head or studies the scriptures. It is spiritual insight, which comes from the process of Krishna Consciousness and learning in disciplic succession, that separates the saints from the swindlers.
4. "It is better to give up one's life than to live with a loss of honor. For, by giving up the body, one experiences only momentary misery, but by living in disgrace, one suffers every day." Here,

Chanakya explains shreyas versus preyas, or long-term versus short-term enjoyments. Even in the material world, people desire things that last. Most people would rather own a home than rent an apartment. Or they would opt for a long-term relationship rather than a casual fling. This truth carries even greater validity on the spiritual platform. "Of the existent there is no cessation," Krishna says, "and of the nonexistent there is no endurance." In other words, if something is real, it will always exist. A dream, for instance, is considered unreal. Why? Because it comes to an end. Similarly, material life comes to an end, and therefore it is considered illusory. But spiritual life is eternal. For this reason, it is considered real in an ultimate sense.

5. "A person who gives up things that are certain and pursues things that are uncertain loses both." Those who understand higher, spiritual values reject gambling. Chanakya advises us not to indulge our speculative tendencies. Rather, we should approach a bona fide spiritual master, and in this way be certain about the goal of life. The guru receives knowledge in a disciplic succession tracing back to Lord Krishna Himself, and thus he is able to give his disciple perfect knowledge. One who receives knowledge in this way can be certain that he will attain spiritual happiness.
6. "Even one moment of life spent cannot be regained for millions of dollars. Therefore, what greater loss is there than time spent uselessly?" Useless time is time spent in materialistic pursuits. One cannot kill time; rather, one is killed by time. Krishna, in the form of kala, time, engages all men. He prefers to engage them in His direct service, and if one is so fortunate as to be directly engaged in devotional service, Krishna Consciousness, then one's time is certainly being spent usefully. And "millions of dollars" cannot come close to the value of even a second in Krishna's service, which has eternal value and unlimited promise.
7. "One should not trust a wicked person, although he may speak sweet words. Because although there may be honey on the tip of his tongue, there is poison in his heart." Chanakya Pandita here asserts the importance of being perceptive. One should not be swayed by appearances. As it is said, "Even the devil can quote scripture." In Krishna Consciousness, we are taught not only to hear what a person says, but to witness his actions as well. The scriptures make it quite clear that a saintly person behaves in a particular way. Chanakya concurs, warning us not to judge someone merely by the words that emanate from his lips. The genuine saint must not only speak about God, but must also live a life of devotional service to Him.
8. "Virtuous persons and fruit-laden trees bow, but fools and dry sticks break because they do not bend." Bowing before great souls, and, especially, before the Deity of the Supreme Lord, is a sign of humility, and it helps one remember one's subservient position. If one refuses to do so, it is a reflection of one's arrogance (or ignorance), and it can stifle one's spiritual progress.
9. "A person becomes great not by sitting on some high seat, but through higher qualities. Can a crow become an eagle simply by sitting on the top of a palatial building?" This is again one of Chanakya's famous quotes in which he disparages superficiality and blind acceptance. Krishna Consciousness is a science, and an adherent is encouraged to use logic and reason as much as faith and devotion. Just because someone adopts the posture of a big guru on a high seat does not mean he is a qualified spiritual master. The actual qualifications are detailed in the scriptures and by the previous saints and sages.
10. "The sounding of the mridanga [drum] in the kirtana is proclaiming loudly that those who have no devotion to Lord Krishna are very shameful and reprehensible. This is so because the mridanga sounds dhiktam, dhiktam, which means 'Oh, great shame! Oh, great shame!'" Herein, Chanakya expresses his devotion to the Supreme Person, Lord Sri Krishna. Using a Sanskrit rhetorical device, the Pandita wittily shows the great shame in wasting one's life outside the service of the Supreme Lord.

Thus reflecting on Chanakya's proverbs in the light of Srila Prabhupada's teachings, I felt ready to lecture at my friend's proverbs course. Armed with a storehouse of Chanakya's proverbs and the even greater storehouse of Srila Prabhupada's insights into the real meaning behind them, I felt that the hardest part of my work was already done.

Great Vaishnava Women

I assume that by now, readers are familiar with the meaning of "Vaishnava." The second word, although more familiar, is more difficult to define when used with the word Vaishnava. The man/woman dichotomy relates to the body, whereas the "Vaishnava" designation refers to the nature of the soul. In one sense, a Vaishnava is not really a man or a woman, and so reference to "women Vaishnavas" or "male Vaishnavas" is inaccurate.

For the sake of common parlance, however, it is practical, if not downright necessary, to acknowledge the bodily distinctions that exist within the material world. After all, a woman can serve God (i.e., act as a Vaishnava) by having children, for example, whereas a man cannot. So while women and men are spiritually equal, they may serve God in different ways. Worldly differences can thus be acknowledged and should be used in divine service. In this sense, then, we may rightly speak of "women Vaishnavas."

Women in Vedic Culture

For a clear understanding of Vaishnava women and the activities that led them to greatness, we look to ancient India's Vedic literature, the spiritual classics upon which Vaishnava dharma rests. In the earliest Vedic texts, we find that the woman was mainly seen as the wife or mother. The emphasis was on her place in the home, and her work was given divine status. Her religious duty was to maintain the spiritual environment of the home and to raise children as devotees of the highest order. This she could do only if her own spiritual practices were strong, and if her meditations were profound. Guidelines are given in the scriptures that can assure perfection on this path.

It might be asked why the woman rather than the man was given the service of homemaker. One answer offered by the Vedic texts is that since the child came from her body, she would naturally take the service of raising the child in God consciousness very seriously. She also could not bear to be away from her child — flesh other flesh. The husband had a less difficult time going out, away from the child, and making a living. The wife, in general, felt more comfortable at home. It was natural and pleasing. Both parties, playing their respective roles, served to create a spiritual atmosphere within the household, especially when they both learned to see their roles as service to Krishna. In this sense, the roles are absolute — the roles they play are equal in that they are merely different ways to serve the Supreme.

The Vedic epic Ramayana explains the social hierarchy that existed within the spiritual home: strinam bharta hi daivatam. That is to say, the husband is the guru for the wife, even as the wife is guru to the child and the spiritual master is the guru for the husband. In other words, in the Vedic household, everyone had a spiritual authority, and in this way social sanity was maintained and everyone in the family could progress toward the ultimate goal of life: spiritual realization.

There were, however, exceptions to the traditional roles of men and women, and as we delineate the great Vaishnava women throughout history, we will elucidate upon the ascetic tradition that made clear the spiritual equality between men and women.

It should be noted that the greatest Vaishnava of all time is Srimati Radharani, who is female. She, of course, is also known as a manifestation of the Supreme and so does not really figure into our discussion.

Among the women described in the Vedic literature, the most important for her representation of ideal womanhood is Sitadevi, the wife of Lord Ramachandra. She embodies all of the qualities to be found in the ideal Vedic wife. Although goddesses such as Parvati and Lakshmi-devi, and other heroines from the Vedic literature such as Savitri and Damayanti are also good examples, it is Sita who is particularly remembered as the ideal in conventional Vedic womanhood. Indeed, even today one hears the Indian mother tell her daughter, "Be like Sitadevi."

Great Women Vaishnavas

Vedic culture gave rise to many great women. In addition to Sitadevi, there were the likes of Draupadi, Kunti, and Gandhari. The great women of the Vedic period are often considered prehistorical personalities, many of them gracing the Earth more than five thousand years ago. Since that period is now shrouded in antiquity, and since many of the stories surrounding their lives are

often confused with mythological tales, I will restrict my discussion to women Vaishnavas within the last five hundred years.

Sachidevi

Sachidevi appeared in Bengal in the mid-Fifteenth century. Playing the role of the perfect mother and wife, she was glorified as the mother of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and the wife of Jagannatha Mishra. Sri Chaitanya, the founder of Gaudiya Vaishnavism, is a combined manifestation of Radha and Krishna.

Sachidevi was the daughter of a well-known Bengali family that migrated from East Bengal (now Bangladesh) and settled in Navadvipa. Her father, Nilambara Chakravarti, was a very influential man because of his knowledge of astrology and the Vedic scriptures.

After marrying Jagannatha Mishra, Sachidevi went through great austerities as a mother. In fact, she lost eight female children during successive pregnancies, and she wept in anticipation of further offspring. Sachidevi's next child was a boy, Vishvarupa, who survived. Some years later, she gave birth to Sri Chaitanya. But while little Nimai (as Chaitanya was called in His youth) was still an infant, Vishvarupa renounced the world and became an ascetic. This brought untold regret to Sachi, for now Vishvarupa would no longer bring joy to the Mishra household. He would now wander the countryside, preaching and visiting temples in service to the Lord.

Jagannatha Mishra did not survive the trauma of Vishvarupa's renunciation. Sachi, however, managed to carry on, and she resolved to raise little Nimai to the best of her ability.

Because of the purity and intensity of her devotion, her aspirations for her last surviving child would be more than fulfilled. As Nimai grew, He developed exceptional features, profound scholarship, and a devotional attitude. His concealed divinity began to blossom, as the scriptures had predicted it would.

But Sachi's domestic happiness was short-lived, for at the age of twenty-four Sri Chaitanya, too, became a renunciant, following in the footsteps of His brother, Vishvarupa. Despite this final blow to her hope of familial bliss, Sachi's perseverance as a devotee remained unscathed.

Sri Chaitanya, in fact, had asked for His mother's permission to lead the life of a renunciant in service to God. Although it was difficult for her, she nonetheless relented, the only stipulation being that He make His headquarters in nearby Jagannatha Puri, so she could regularly hear news of His activities.

Although Sri Chaitanya's renunciation is remembered as a pivotal event in the history of Gaudiya Vaishnavism, Sachidevi's renunciation is glorified in the annals of Vaishnava history as unbounded. For in allowing the Lord — her son — to live the life of an ascetic, she made the ultimate sacrifice. According to the Lord's desire, she agreed to worship Him in separation. Sachidevi thus experienced the highest, most esoteric relationship with the Lord, and Vaishnavas throughout the world seek to emulate her uncompromising devotion.

Vishnupriya

If Sachidevi was the perfect mother, Vishnupriya was the perfect wife. Lakshmi-devi, Sri Chaitanya's first wife, died prematurely when she was bitten by a snake. Mother Sachi then pleaded with her divine son to remarry. He did, and the bride was Vishnupriya, daughter of the aristocratic Sanatana Mishra, a well-known politician.

When Sri Chaitanya soon left to pursue the life of an ascetic, Vishnupriya made the same commitment and sacrifice as did Sachidevi. Vishnupriya, however, also had to take care of Sachi, who was now becoming old and infirm.

Vishnupriya spent as much time with the name of God as with her beloved mother-in-law, and her reputation soon grew as a prominent ascetic in the Gaudiya Vaishnava line.

It is said that she would set aside one grain of rice each time she would chant the Hare Krishna mantra 108 times. When her utterances of the name were complete for a particular day, she would boil the accumulated rice and take that, and only that, as her daily meal.

As her austerities and exemplary behavior became known within the Vaishnava community, she was glorified for being the model of a chaste wife and also for being an ascetic of the mystical tradition. This made her a leader in the Vaishnava community.

Jahnavadevi

Important women Vaishnavas soon took leading roles in Lord Chaitanya's movement, and even assumed the position of guru. One of the more prominent woman gurus was Jahnavadevi, wife of Nityananda Prabhu, Sri Chaitanya's intimate associate and plenary expansion.

When Nityananda Prabhu married the two daughters of Sarakhala Suryadasa Pandita, the entire Vaishnava community was overcome with ecstasy, for the two girls were extremely pious and were known as great Vaishnavas. The younger wife, Vasudha, gave birth to two children: a boy, Virabhadra; and a girl, Gangadevi.

The young Vasudha soon passed away, however, and Jahnavadevi resolved to raise her sister's children. In addition, she adopted a boy named Ramachandra. So Jahnavadevi spent much of her youth taking care of the three children, making sure they became great devotees.

Virabhadra, especially, grew to be a leader in the Vaishnava community, and when he accepted Jahnavadevi, his stepmother, as his guru, many prominent Vaishnavas did so as well.

Much of Jahnavadevi's fame began as a result of her relationship with Nityananda Prabhu. But her activities soon revealed her greatness, and she was respected as a superlative Vaishnava on her own merit.

Her devotion to the famous Gopinatha Deity of Lord Krishna was so intense that this endeared her to the pious and impious alike. By her example, she showed how to perform Deity worship and devote one's life to spiritual pursuits. She even presided over huge Vaishnava festivals and gave initiation to men and women alike. It was Jahnavadevi, too, who had the insight to keep close contact with the Goswamis of Vrindavana, Lord Chaitanya's chief followers there. In this way she sought to keep solidarity and unification between the branches of Gaudiya Vaishnavism in Bengal and in Vrindavana (Uttar Pradesh). The cohesive form of Gaudiya Vaishnavism that exists today is largely a result of her efforts.

One other phenomenon in the life of Jahnavadevi is pertinent to our discussion. Devotion to her mission and purpose became so strong that, in her own lifetime, a deity was made of her, and this was to be placed alongside the Gopinatha Deity, who was the object of her veneration. A council was convened in Jaipur to decide the propriety of placing her deity next to Lord Gopinatha. The king of Jaipur and the assembled Vaishnavas decided unanimously that the deity should be established, and it was indeed placed next to Gopinatha within Jahnavadevi's lifetime. Such a distinguished honor is uncommon among Vaishnava men and women alike.

Hemlata and Gangamata Goswami

In the next generation after Sri Chaitanya and Nityananda Prabhu (the Seventeenth century, or as late as the Eighteenth), many great female Vaishnavas followed the example of Jahnavadevi, two of the most prominent being Hemlata and Gangamata Goswami.

Not much is known about Hemlata Thakurani. She was the eldest daughter of Srinivasa Acharya and had many disciples, both men and women. She was a mystic of the highest order and developed a profound sense of love for God.

Gangamata Goswami, on the other hand, is written about quite often in the pages of Gaudiya Vaishnava history, especially in the historical records of the Nityananda-vamsha (from which she descends). Her guru was Haridasa Pandita, a disciple of Anantacharya, who was a follower of Jahnavadevi. In this way, her disciplic descent is traced to Nityananda Prabhu.

She was the daughter of King Naresha Narayana of Puntaya, of the Rajsahi district of Bengal. Unlike most great women Vaishnavas, even the mystics, Gangamata never married, and so she was given the title "Goswami" ("controller of the senses") for her strict celibacy and profound wisdom. She did not take formal sannyasa (the renounced order of life in the Vedic social system), for she felt that the scriptures recommend sannyasa solely for men. But, in spirit, she adopted this path and so received the title "Goswami."

The Deity of her heart was Madana Gopala, and she worshiped this form of Krishna with great devotion. In her youth, she studied in Vrindavana, and after many years she moved to Jagannatha Puri, where she lived in the ruins of what was formerly the house of the great scholar Sarvabhauma Bhattacharya. Bhattacharya had been a prominent disciple of Sri Chaitanya, and although his house was now, almost two hundred years later, merely a run-down facsimile of its former self, Gangamata stayed there for the spiritual inspiration it bestowed.

At that house, she found the sacred Damodara-shila (a Deity of Krishna in the form of a stone)

once worshipped by Sarvabhauma Bhattacharya himself. She worshipped this Deity with the same intensity with which she had worshiped Madana Gopala in Vrindavana.

Mukundadeva Maharaja, the king of Puri, once came to hear her recite Srimad Bhagavatam. He was so taken by her pure recitation and her elaborate explanations that he became her disciple and encouraged much of Puri to do the same. He financed a special temple to be built for her, and she became one of the prominent Vaishnavas of Orissa.

Conclusion

I have given only some preliminary examples of great women Vaishnavas. Nonetheless, we have seen examples of a great Vaishnava mother, a wife, mystics, celibates, and gurus. In short, the Vaishnava tradition has established precedents for women to assert themselves and distinguish themselves as outstanding Vaishnavas, both in traditional roles more commonly ascribed to women and in very independent roles that would, perhaps, be the envy of men.

Great women Vaishnavas have existed throughout the ages, and they have demonstrated that the qualities of leadership, scholarship, intelligence, wisdom, and devotion are affairs of the heart and mind, irrespective of sex.

Postscript: Feminism

I have been asked about whether even Vaishnava women today feel exploited, being the products of a male-dominated society, and thus might not feminists in general feel slighted by this philosophy? There may very well be ample justification for the dissatisfaction of the feminists. Perhaps they have indeed been oppressed and exploited by a male-dominated society. Let us not forget, however, that it is a materialistic society in which this takes place. Exploitation is a symptom of selfishness. And selfishness is a symptom of the bodily concept of life. My contention is this: it is this bodily concept of life that is at the heart of materialistic thinking, and it is this, rather than male domination, that creates the exploitative mentality.

If one identifies himself or herself as nothing more than a material body, the external self becomes of central interest, more important than the person within. Bodily differences are accentuated. Spiritual unity is overlooked. It would seem that the solution to exploitation, the major problem facing the feminists, is to obliterate materialism, not sexism. Sexist thinking is a symptom of the disease. The disease is materialism!

It might be argued that even women who have liberated themselves from materialism are still subject to the possible exploitation of those who have not, especially by men. While this is unfortunately true, a woman who pursues spirituality is, in a sense, protected by her discipline and the strictures of her religious tradition. She can only be exploited externally, and through it all, she would probably be found praying for the person of lower consciousness who is doing the exploiting. To those who appreciate her, she plays a leading and honored role within the social parameters of her family and community. Whatever the consciousness of others, she avoids exploitation by being thoroughly devoted to God, Krishna, and she thus sees a spiritual equality, not a contrived material one. She knows that she is spiritually equal, and so do her spiritually evolved brothers.

She feels that feminism betrays a narrow understanding of the purpose of existence, and that it is predicated on competition between men and women. She knows that the only competition worth pursuing is between a person and his or her own conditioning. She has a role to play in her service to God, and it is this which concerns her, not some petty squabble about bodily differences.

I have also been asked if Vaishnava women are able to hold positions equal to those of men, and whether or not they ever accept service from male devotees. The answer is, not if they are advanced devotees. According to Manu's Dharma-shastra, there is a hierarchy, and in Vedic culture all members happily followed the system for social sanity. Everyone played his or her role. Everyone had an authority, and everyone was subordinate to someone else. In this way, one learned submission, culminating in submission to God. But the Vaishnava tradition added something special, an underlying and esoteric message of the scriptures: the true devotee wishes to be the servant of the servant of the servant of Krishna.

So, in actuality, Vaishnavism is material culture in reverse. Not "Who is serving me?" but "Who can I serve?" This is the devotees' motto. So advanced devotees desire to be the menial servant, not the master. And in this way, they develop humility before God.

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Advanced devotees do accept service from novices, and in this way a novice can make advancement on the spiritual path. This holds true for both men and women. Many of the great women I have described here were gurus of both men and women, and consequently accepted service. In the ultimate analysis, it is not gender but spiritual advancement that is the criterion.

Bodily Differences

Some people have also questioned me about how Vaishnavism views bodily differences between the genders, such as science's claim that gender might be determined by variations in the divisions between the right and left lobes of the brain. The research in this area leaves a great deal to be desired, but the basic premise is reasonable. In the Bhagavad Gita, for example, it is said that speech, memory, intelligence, faithfulness, and patience are feminine qualities. Is this sexist? These are admirable qualities. And this information is being confirmed by research into the right and left sides of the brain. There is scientific evidence that certain subtle functions of the brain are more characteristic of women than of men.

It is true, however, that to acknowledge mental and intellectual differences can lead to exploitation. This is not the ultimate point, however. Our mental and intellectual faculties are equal, but our mental and intellectual strengths and points of emphasis may vary from body to body. This can be and is heavily influenced by the kind of body we have. Dr. Georgene Seward, Professor Emeritus at Columbia University, has written two fascinating books on this subject: Sex and the Social Order and Psychotherapy and Culture Conflict. These books were the landmark scientific publications that proved once and for all that "cerebral asymmetry" definitely exists between men and women.

Sometimes we search for perfect egalitarianism, and in doing so we tend to ignore that there are legitimate differences between sexes, races, nationalities, and so on. But differences are not bad. They are only…different. For some reason, we tend to fear the prospect of physical or psychological differences, maybe because so many people feel the need to invest these differences with a sense with superiority or inferiority, making value judgements on individuals or groups. There is no need to do this. According to our bodies, environment, and conditioning, there will be differences. But one need not be seen as better than the other.

The fact is that differences exist, biological and otherwise, and to deny it is ridiculous. Indeed, it is a denial of our own humanity. We cannot respect differences among people unless we first admit them. This is not sexism or racism — it is merely common sense.

Rain of Mercy: The Exemplary Life of Bhakti Tirtha Swami

Bhakti Tirtha Swami (1950-2005), one of my dearest friends and mentors, was a person of singular determination, a courageous and bold preacher of Vaishnava dharma, the science of the soul. He had a passion for Srila Prabhupada's mission that took him around the world, particularly to Eastern Europe, behind the Iron Curtain, where he surpassed all others in distributing his spiritual master's books, often risking his own life, and to Africa, where kings and queens acknowledged him as a chief and recognized him as a spiritual leader.

He was esteemed in Prabhupada's own institution as well. In ISKCON he was a respected sannyasi, a monk in the renounced order of life, and a guru, with disciples of his own. He was the world's first Afro-American Vaishnava spiritual master, and he published many books, too, explaining how to apply Krishna Consciousness in the modern world. His books use the language of conflict resolution and depth psychology, as well as that of the New Age. They foster spiritual advancement through principle-centered leadership techniques and inner realizations. In addition, he had a tremendous ability to touch people on a deep level, to change lives, as thousands of Godbrothers, friends, and disciples can attest.

The various names by which Bhakti Tirtha Swami is known in ISKCON tell us much about who he was. And I often enjoyed discussing this with him. For example, Srila Prabhupada gave him the name Ghanasyama Dasa, which means "servant of the blackish cloud." The name Ghanasyama refers to Krishna, who is as beautiful as a dark rain cloud, with a complexion to match. So I used to playfully say to Bhakti Tirtha Swami that in naming him "Ghanasyama," Prabhupada had acknowledged his beauty as a charismatic black man, an Afro-American with marked exquisiteness, both materially and spiritually. Upon hearing this, of course, he would characteristically laugh, or shine his contagious smile, expressing humility as he waved away with his hand the very notion of being like Krishna or of possessing some form of visible beauty, whether mundane or otherworldly.

I also pointed out to him that "Bhakti Tirtha," the name he was given at his sannyasa ceremony, was highly appropriate as well. He is like the true tirtha, or "holy place," I would say, in that such places are like bridges to the spiritual world. The word tirtha is conceptually linked to tirthankara, or "bridge-builder," the idea being that a true holy place is like a bridge to the spiritual realm, and that teachers who help people achieve that realm are like tirthas in their own right. He, especially, was like a bridge, using bhakti, or devotion, to bring people to Krishna. Hence, "Bhakti Tirtha." Along related lines, his style of conveying Krishna Consciousness emphasized the importance of "bridge-building," so that outsiders would have easy access to the philosophy. Due to his highly developed sense of compassion, he intensely labored to bring people to the lotus feet of Krishna. For a brief period in ISKCON's history, in fact, Bhakti Tirtha Swami was known as Srila Krishnapada, which, again, indicates his favored position at Lord Krishna's lotus feet and his ever-broadening capacity to give others shelter there.

Of course, he was also a "swami," which indicates one who is able to control his senses. As we shall see, his life as a devotee of Krishna reveals these qualities in abundance.

John Favors God, and God Favors Him

Bhakti Tirtha Swami was born John Edwin Favors on February 25, 1950, the youngest of four sisters and two brothers. He was marked by a speech impediment that he thought he might never conquer. An additional obstacle was that he was born into a poor family in a Cleveland ghetto. But his parents taught him well, giving him confidence, religion, and a sense of giving. Although he had few clothes, for example, his mother would often donate them to neighboring boys and girls, hoping to teach her children the importance of charity. She also volunteered long hours at local churches, giving her family a sense of sacrifice.

In fact, John was a child evangelist, and while his speech defect made giving sermons difficult, he spoke best when speaking on religious topics. Somehow, his stuttering lessened when he shared the words of scripture, and in later years it subsided, with only the barest hint of it when he spoke. As a youth he regularly appeared on local television stations to preach the Christian Gospel. "Because I had seen so much poverty," he said, "I was interested in doing something for myself and others." He excelled as a student while at Cleveland's East Technical High School, and spent a good portion of his spare time doing welfare work.

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He received a scholarship to Hawken Academy, a distinguished preparatory school in Cleveland. While there, he became enamored of Dr. Martin Luther King's civil rights movement, and he eventually became a local leader for the cause. Despite his involvement in political concerns, or perhaps because of it, he became an exemplary student. In 1968, his exceptional grades earned him a scholarship to Princeton University, where he majored in psychology and Afro-American studies. At Princeton, his political interests grew as he joined the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee, the Black Panther Party, and other activist groups. He was elected student body president in 1971 and chairman of the Third World Coalition in 1972.

Melvin R. McCray, one of his colleagues at Princeton, remembers him as an extraordinary person. McCray wrote in the Princeton Alumni Weekly:

> I saw John Favors for the first time at the introductory meeting of the Association of Black Collegians (ABC) in the fall of 1970. As ABC's president, he delivered an impassioned speech on the role of blacks at Princeton. Though only 5' 9", he was an imposing figure in his leopard-print dashiki and matching fez-like hat, with walking stick, pipe, bushy afro, and full beard. At that time he called himself Toshombe Abdul, and he spoke with the force and dynamism of Malcolm X.

While at Princeton and soon thereafter, John began serving as Assistant Coordinator for Penal Programs in the State of New Jersey in the Public Defender's office. He was also a director in several drug abuse clinics and a special consultant for Educational Testing Services in the United States. Through it all, he maintained a healthy interest in "mystic Christianity," as he called it, and earnestly pursued his spiritual calling. This is not to say that, while at college, he did not indulge in the usual activities of the day. It was, after all, the turbulent '60s, with its sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll. Still, while reminiscing he said, "I tried my best in those days to forget God. But despite my best efforts, I inevitably found myself continually glorifying Him."

He explored the teachings of Sri Chinmoy, Swami Satchidananda, and a little-known mentor whom he never named. This latter mentor directed him to the saint who would become his spiritual master, His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada. At first, however, he was reluctant to pursue Prabhupada and his teachings. "The first time I saw a Hare Krishna," he said, "was up in Harvard Square at a football game. It was very cold, and a group of them were standing on the corner chanting. I looked at them and thought, "This is the epitome of absurdity." I presumed they were rich white students just out looking for some different kind of drug or alternate experience. But when I passed by again two hours later, they were still on the corner, chanting in the cold. I knew then there was something extraordinary about them."

Finally, a girlfriend gave him an album of Srila Prabhupada singing, called Krishna Meditation. As he listened intently to the guru whom his mentor had suggested he would recognize as his eternal spiritual teacher, he began to remember something he had long forgotten: he was a soul caught in a material body, and he wasn't black or white but, rather, a spiritual being. He began to weep uncontrollably.

Soon he was visiting the Brooklyn Hare Krishna temple, and soon after that, he renounced the little he had to pursue Krishna Consciousness with complete conviction. He moved into the temple, where the leading devotees, seeing his intellectual acumen and natural teaching ability, sent him to Dallas, Texas, to assist in the then-fledgling Gurukula, a school for ISKCON children. Upon arriving there, however, he met Satsvarupa Dasa Goswami, and the course of his life changed. He was attracted to Satsvarupa Maharaja's simple and straightforward presentation of Krishna Consciousness and accepted the senior devotee as a sort of instructing spiritual master. At the time, Satsvarupa was starting a travelling sankirtana party, a group of devotees who would travel together distributing Srila Prabhupada's books. John wanted in.

A Beautiful Blackish Cloud Arises

It quickly became evident that John Favors was no ordinary devotee. For example, he chanted at least thirty-two rounds of Hare Krishna on his beads daily, rather than the standard sixteen. To accomplish this, he would rise earlier than most devotees and would usually go to sleep late at night. He also kept a diary in which he wrote a letter to Srila Prabhupada every day. In these letters, he would reveal his weaknesses, pray to overcome them, and express his determination to become pure. His eating was sparse, usually fruits and nuts, sometimes a few carrots, bananas, and a little butter.

Most amazingly, he outdid everyone else on the team he traveled with, distributing Prabhupada's

books with the skill of an experienced book salesman. Soon, Hridayananda Maharaja took over the party. He trained the young men, particularly Mahabuddhi Dasa and John, to sell books to university libraries. The party became known in ISKCON as "The Library Party," underlining its newly chosen venue for selling books. John was highly successful in bringing books to the collegiate intelligentsia.

As weeks turned into months, he was initiated. Satsvarupa Maharaja recommended him highly to Srila Prabhupada, who wrote back a letter in February, 1973, giving him the name Ghanasyama Dasa. As Prabhupada's "blackish cloud," he lovingly created a distinct brand of torrential rain: a downpour of spiritual literature. Throughout 1974 and 1975, Srila Prabhupada wrote numerous letters to Satsvarupa Maharaja and Rameshvara Maharaja, under whom Ghanasyama served. Prabhupada praised his activities and marveled at his success in selling books. Prabhupada also wrote Ghanasyama several personal letters during this period. In one, he wrote, "You are rendering first-quality service to Krishna by your preaching success. Be blessed and continue your efforts and Krishna will recognize you very quickly."

Teaming up with Kalakantha Dasa, Ghanasyama next went to Europe, specifically England, to carry on the book distribution of the Library Party. However, success there was minimal. As Kalakantha later reflected, "The Brits, at that time, seemed reluctant because of the India connection. It was still a sore spot for them." After a while, the two ISKCON compatriots split up, with Ghanasyama going to Eastern Europe. There he distributed Prabhupada's books in Communist countries, where in most cases religion was banned. He lived his Krishna conscious life in secret, and in austere conditions. In Russia he lived on public trains, going from one to another throughout the night, chanting his rounds in public bathrooms. Despite all contrary odds, he continued to distribute with great success, remaining the top Library Party salesman. His determination and positive results brought great pleasure to Srila Prabhupada.

Rain of Mercy

When Prabhupada was ill, preparing to depart from this world in the summer and autumn of 1977, reports of Ghanasyama's exploits were among the few things that brought him solace. Numerous letters from Tamal Krishna Goswami, Prabhupada's secretary at the time, reported Prabhupada's unparalleled joy when hearing of Ghanasyama's activities. Naturally, then, when Prabhupada made his final trip to the West, to England, Ghanasyama received special mercy in Prabhupada's presence. He called the young book distributor into his room and, asking him to sit at his side, embraced him. With tears in his eyes, Prabhupada told him, "Your life is perfect."

But his "perfection" did not make him complacent. After Prabhupada left this world, Ghanasyama continued to distribute books like a man possessed, and to serve his guru's mission with full enthusiasm. In due course, in New Vrindavana, West Virginia, he took sannyasa from Kirtanananda Swami, receiving the name Bhakti Tirtha Swami. This was in 1979. Soon afterwards, he went to Jagannatha Puri and, although Westerners are not allowed in the temple, managed to get in to see the beautiful Jagannatha deities. He also met Mohammed Ali in 1981 and became one of his spiritual advisors. He became a member of ISKCON's Governing Body in 1982 and an initiating spiritual master in 1985.

During this period, he also started The Committee for Urban Spiritual Development. The aim of this project was close to his heart, since, as an inner-city child himself, he could relate to the concerns of the downtrodden and knew how to bring them to Krishna Consciousness. Inner-city preaching, combined with welfare work and *prasadam* distribution, usually through opening restaurants, became a mainstay of his endeavors. His restaurant in Washington, D.C., was particularly successful. But perhaps his most prominent accomplishment in America is his founding, in 1988, of the Institute for Applied Spiritual Technology (IFAST), dedicated to presenting Krishna Consciousness to New Age spiritual seekers around the world. One of the aims of the Institute was to establish self-sufficient farm communities, and to that end he rejuvenated ISKCON's Gita-nagari project in Port Royal, Pennsylvania. With this project, the Swami found an attentive audience among professionals as well — high-powered doctors, lawyers, and others saw truth in his message

It was around this time that he had a dream wherein Srila Prabhupada requested him to "open the door." In the dream, he continued to tend to other services, leaving Prabhupada's request aside. Finally, after Prabhupada uttered the request for a second and then a third time, Bhakti Tirtha opened the door, and a multitude of African people came running through. From this dream, he deduced that Srila Prabhupada wanted him to go to Africa, and so, without any particular inclination toward that

part of the world, and in the midst of a successful project in Washington, he left, suddenly, and with little planning.

In the end, his African venture was immensely successful. His accomplishments in Africa, and elsewhere, are too many and too vast to describe in detail here. In Africa, he opened and oversaw two farm communities and more than twenty temples across six countries. In addition, he maintained two public schools and worked at a grassroots level to enhance the spiritual lives of people throughout the continent, particularly in West Africa. He stayed there, on and off, for sixteen years, meeting and working with the country's most distinguished dignitaries, celebrities, and leaders, including Nobel Peace Prize laureate Nelson Mandela. In 1990 he was honored by being given the position of a high chief in Warri, Nigeria, in recognition of his outstanding work in Africa. He was widely accepted as an authentic religious leader throughout the African subcontinent.

As he became something of a well-known international spiritual leader, with numerous college lectures, television and radio talk shows, and inter-religious conferences lined up for years to come, the ravages of time manifested in an unexpected way, changing his plans forever.

Die Before You Die

Bhakti Tirtha Swami was diagnosed with a stage-four melanoma on his left foot. Ten years before, he had been told of a suspicious lump there. But it was benign, and removal would mean losing the use of his foot entirely. In a later attempt to remove it, doctors found that it was malignant. A diagnosis of diabetes limited the medical options. At first, he tried natural cures, which showed some promise, but ultimately helped little.

In August 2004, his specialist advised him of the need for chemotherapy, immediate amputation of the foot, and the removal of affected lymph nodes. He conceded, but when only minimal success was reported, he prepared to leave this world. Bhakti Tirtha Swami saw in this an opportunity: "Krishna is allowing me to develop more purity, more potency to stage a change; he is allowing me to help others as well as myself to focus in a deeper way; we have to be ready to go the extra mile for the devotees."

The illness did not come as a surprise to him. He had long prayed to take on the karmic debts of others, to suffer so that others might be released from suffering. He had prayed: "Dear Lord, whatever we need to be better servants for Srila Prabhupada's mission, let it happen or come to us. Whatever we need to have taken away to become pure in Srila Prabhupada's service, let it be taken away."

He wrote that he was willing to die for the misdeeds of others, and that in dying he would somehow bring his friends and Godbrothers closer together. This is, in fact, what happened. According to Bhakti Charu Swami, another ISKCON leader and a friend who had been in close contact with him at the end, "Maharaja [Bhakti Tirtha Swami] emphasized that the sufferings of so many devotees had become too much for him to bear. He was praying very intensely to Srila Prabhupada that he wanted to become purified, become a better disciple, and help those who are struggling, at any cost."

Radhanatha Swami, an ISKCON leader and one of Bhakti Tirtha Swami's dearest friends, was constantly by his side for the last couple of months as his main caregiver. Others also stayed with Bhakti Tirtha Swami, including disciples who were physicians. Friends and well-wishers poured in, showing support, offering prayers, and seeking blessings. Devotees from around the world resolved longstanding differences in his name.

As his final few weeks passed, his consciousness was more and more absorbed in Krishna, and he went into solitary meditation, allowing only those who spoke about Krishna to be with him. By the time of his departure, his absorption was total. He listened only to Krishna's Vrindavana pastimes and gazed only upon a beautiful painting of Krishna and one of Prabhupada, in front of his bed. As he passed away, he was clasping a salagrama deity, and another one was placed on his head. He was sprayed with sacred Radha-kunda water, and a tulasi leaf was placed on his tongue. Truly, he left this world as he had lived: as an exemplary devotee.

When his rich, productive life was reaching its close, he and I began signing our letters to each other with the Sanskrit words aham tvam prinami: "I love you." This gesture signified our deep appreciation for each other's work. He had many times expressed his high regard for my books, and he knew well how much I relished his. But there was more. He and I felt like kindred spirits in yet another way. We both took it as our service to stretch the envelope, as it were, to show devotees, through word and deed, that there are many approaches to Krishna Consciousness, that there is more

than one way to serve the Lord. Still further, the new way of signing our letters showed the kind of person he was, always ready to express his love for other devotees. I love you, too, Bhakti Tirtha Swami, and you will always be in my heart.

Srinivasa, Narottama, Syamananda, and . . . Gary?

The Beginning of Book Distribution

Bhakta (devotee) Gary was enthused to go out and distribute Srila Prabhupada's books. He looked lovingly at his four big boxes of Bhagavad Gita as It Is, which he hurriedly strapped to his metal carrier. Running through New York City streets with his divine pull-cart, his destination was Union Square, a popular park where massive amounts of people awaited, unaware of the treasure he was bringing them.

Once arriving in the park, he realized that he was horribly parched and needed to get a bottle of water. Carefully hiding his literary gems in a usually safe corner, near friendly street venders who would watch his books in situations much like this one, he dashed across the street to purchase what he needed.

Just a few minutes later, upon his return, the boxes were gone! He was frantic. Apparently, he had neglected to ask the nearby venders, as he usually would, and so they didn't even know he had stored them there. Where could the books be? Who would take them? He asked everyone in sight, looking this way and that. No books. He felt a void in his heart, deeply lamenting their separation.

Dejected, he went back to the ashram and told all his friends of the mishap. That night, he tossed and turned, unable to forget the tragic event.

Two days later, the ashram received a call. It seems a woman who worked in the area had found the books. Bhakta Gary was delighted, and after securing the exact location from the woman on the phone, rushed down to Union Square. Sure enough, at a clothing store directly adjacent to his usual book distribution spot, was the store specified by the God-sent caller.

"I went out this morning to bring out the trash," she started, "and there were these four neat boxes, on an unusually clean metal carrier. The boxes were almost glowing! Somehow, they seemed special. I just had to look inside, to see what this was. To my surprise, they were Bhagavad Gitas. I had always heard about this book but never read it. I started reading and noticed the phone number in the back. So I called."

Bhakta Gary was delighted. Reunited with his books, he felt a deep-rooted satisfaction. He could not explain it, but it was if God Himself had given him a special blessing. He gave the rescuer a copy of the Gita as a reward. She felt blessed.

Narottama, Srinivasa, and Syamananda

Although Bhakta Gary, being a newcomer to the Vaishnava tradition, was probably unaware of it, his story is reminiscent of an ancient tale that goes back to the early days of Gaudiya Vaishnavism. I am referring to the time just after the Goswamis of Vrindavana compiled their sacred texts and deputed their three most important disciples to carry them from Vrindavana to Bengal, to be gradually disseminated throughout India and, eventually, the rest of the world.

Srinivas Acharya, Narottama Dasa Thakura, and Shyamananda Prabhu had walked some 800 miles, from their respective provinces in Bengal, just to study with and serve Jiva Goswami, the youngest and most prolific of Sri Chaitanya's accomplished followers. They accepted him as their shiksha, or instructing, guru — they had taken initiation from Gopala Bhatta Goswami, Lokanatha Goswami, and Hridaya Chaitanya Goswami, respectively, and tradition allows only one initiating spiritual master. Their diksha, or initiating, gurus all wanted them to study under Sri Jiva.

Once having ascertained that they were unmatchable in their studies and practices, Sri Jiva began preparations for their long and arduous journey. He told them that they would be taking Gaudiya Vaishnavism's seminal and original manuscripts — copying was difficult at that time, and there were no printing presses — to Bengal, where they could be shared with devotees who eagerly awaited them.

According to the account in the Seventeenth-century Prema-vilasa, the three stalwart men wept for three hours when they were given their mission. Not because they weren't honored — they were! — but because it meant leaving the sacred land of Vrindavana, which they had come to love with all their hearts.

These devotees were Sri Jiva's best students, and he would spare no pains for their welfare. He

had a rich merchant disciple from Mathura supply a large cart, four strong bullocks, and ten armed guards. The manuscripts — original works by Rupa, Sanatana, Gopala Bhatta, Jiva, and others — were placed in a large wooden chest, which was bolted and covered with a waxed cloth. Sri Jiva also secured a special passport from the king of Jaipur that his three students would need to show as they traveled to eastern India. After much ado, Srinivasa, Narottama, and Shyamananda embarked on their mission.

The Journey to Bengal

As they began traveling, Sri Jiva and several other devotees accompanied them, unable to bear the separation. As the caravan approached Agra, the well-wishers lagged behind. Now they were fully underway, and there could be no turning back. After several months, the party reached a small village named Gopalapura, within the boundaries of the Malla kingdom of Vana Vishnupura, which is on the border with Bengal. When they retired that night, they felt confident that their mission was almost complete.

The king of Vishnupura, Virhamvir, was the leader of a relentless group of bandits who were terrorizing the surrounding villages. His numerous hired hands and assassins were notorious on the local highways, robbing and sometimes killing people on the road.

The cart that was accompanied by Srinivasa, Narottama, and Shyamananda was especially interesting because the King's advisors had determined that it held a great treasure — they were associated with gifted astrologers who revealed to them that this caravan was special, containing something of incomparable value. The court thieves inflamed each other's imaginations by extrapolating on the astrologers' words: "This cart is filled with jewels more valuable than gold."

They saw only fifteen men escorting the cart — ten armed soldiers, two drivers, and three holy men. This was no match for them, as they had over two hundred armed men. They followed the cart for quite a distance, deciding it was best to steal the "jewels" when the caravan was close to home.

Finally, in Gopalapura, the sages and their treasure spent the night near a beautiful lake. All fifteen men slept soundly, tired from the journey. When they awakened, their worst nightmare had come to pass: the manuscripts had been stolen. They wept. Srinivasa, the leader of the party, advised Narottama and Shyamananda to proceed to Bengal and Orissa with the teachings of the Six Goswamis, if not in book form, then at least with their words and personal example. Srinivasa himself said he would retrieve the manuscripts, though he did not know how. But first, he wrote to Jiva Goswami in Vrindavana, telling him all that had happened.

Meanwhile, King Virhamvir's servants appeared before him with the court's most recent acquisition: Srinivasa's carefully wrapped chest of "the most precious jewels." The King dropped everything else to relish what would surely be his greatest conquest. But when he removed the cloth covering, he found only manuscripts.

The palm leaf at the very top included the signature "Sri Rupa Goswami," and as the King perused the work, he felt something change within his heart. As his sense of spirituality awakened, he began to suspect that he had made a grave offense.

That night, he had an unusual dream. He saw a beautiful and effulgent person, who said to him, "Do not worry. I will soon come to Vishnupura and we will meet. At that time, I will retrieve my manuscripts, and you will be relieved of all sinful reactions." The next morning, the King awoke with a fresh perspective, waiting for the day that he would meet that special soul who had come to him in his dream.

Within a short time, Srinivasa rode into town. He attended the lectures of the King's scholar, named Vyasacharya, and found them wanting. When he raised objections, and the King heard his devotional explanations and saw his personal effulgence, he knew that this was the owner of the precious manuscripts and the person who had appeared in his dream.

King Virhamvir was greatly moved. "Who are you?" he asked. Srinivasa humbly identified himself, but he did not mention the lost books. He stayed in Vana Vishnupur for some time, giving the King his association and reciting the sacred scriptures for him.

After several weeks, Srinivasa revealed his story: "I came from the holy city of Vrindavana with a mission from Gopala Bhatta Goswami and Jiva Goswami," Srinivasa replied. "I was to bring their writings to Bengal. But unfortunately, this treasure was robbed within your kingdom. If I cannot retrieve these books, I would prefer to lose my life. Can you help me get them back?"

The King burst into tears, admitting that it was his own men that had stolen the books. He

expressed great sorrow at their misdeed, but then, reflecting for a moment, he added, "But there is a positive side to all of this. Our meeting would not have otherwise occurred. I would commit these sins again and again for only a moment of your association."

Srinivasa laughed and reassured the King that sinful life was unnecessary for attaining his association. Srinivasa then forgave the King for all his sins and asked him to sin no more.

The King led Srinivasa to the room where his treasures were kept, and Srinivasa saw the trunk with the Goswamis' literature. Feeling intense ecstasy, he took the garland of flowers from his own neck and placed it on King Virhamvir. He then initiated the king by reciting the maha-mantra — Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare/ Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare — in his ear, and by giving him the name Haricharana Dasa. Thereafter, the King and his family became dedicated Gaudiya Vaishnavas, and the entire kingdom, it is said, took to the principles of Vaishnava dharma.

Back to Gary

The correlation between this historic book distribution story and Gary's is, in one sense, slight. He is a newcomer to the tradition, and there are other specifics that vary. Still, in essence, the stories are inevitably linked. Just like our transcendental triumvirate, Gary was trying to distribute books on behalf of the Goswamis, with sincerity and enthusiasm. The books then mysteriously went missing, and Gary was devastated. Again, this brings to mind the legendary Vaishnava trio. The separation from the books deepened Gary's resolve and, arguably, brought him even closer to the tradition he embraced. The books were retrieved — union, it might be said, took the place of separation, and Gary knew unbounded joy.

We can only pray that Gary goes on distributing books and magazines. I saw him distributing Back to Godhead magazine just the other day, and that the bliss he derived from the lesson of separation and its attendant union stays with him. We also pray that he fully follows in the footsteps of his three luminous predecessors, who went on to revolutionize the world with their spiritual insights, dynamic teachings, and exemplary behavior.[53]

Review of The Journey Home: Autobiography of an American Swami

by Radhanath Swami (San Rafael, California: Mandala Publishing, 2008)

The Journey Home is a spiritual memoir — the real-life, autobiographical account of an exceptional countercultural youth who leaves America in search of himself. Trying desperately to access the continent within, he sets out first for Europe, visiting cathedrals, holy places, and hippie hotspots. With little more than a seeker's heart and a blues harmonica, he leaves few avenues unexamined, as his overland journey takes him through the Middle East and beyond. Western religious ideals and the models who exemplify them are his first natural guideposts and ports of call. He is open, non-sectarian and, most of all, earnest.

Ultimately, he arrives in India by the end of 1970, where he finds himself living the life of a wandering sadhu, a mendicant, with little money and fewer resources. His travels lead him in many directions, both geographically and philosophically, and the reader watches him age with the wisdom of centuries. In a few months, his young world is augmented by experience and realization. We accompany him into a magical land of yoga, meditation, and soul-stirring revelations. At various points in his journey, he meets deformed lepers and frightening Naga Babas, contemplative Buddhists and mystic yogis — even old friends from the West and angelic devotees.

Through the author's personal encounters, the reader is introduced to many of the prominent yogis, monks, and gurus of the era: Swami Shivananda, Swami Rama, Swami Satchidananda, Swami Chidananda, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Ananda Mayi Ma, Neem Karoli Baba, Muktananda, and even the Dalai Lama and Mother Teresa — either directly or through their legends and teachings. We meet many nameless luminaries as well, and those whose names, if not for Radhanath Swami, we would have never heard. Our blossoming seeker meditates under the original Bodhi Tree where the Buddha himself had meditated and achieved enlightenment, and studies with masters and saints.

Each experience inches him closer to his goal. We witness, with him, the burning of dead bodies in Varanasi and fascinating pilgrimages to both ancient cities and inner worlds where life takes on new meaning, high in the Himalayas, Tibet, and in holy lands innumerable. He lives in caves, deep in forests, under trees, and moves throughout the subcontinent with a thirst for "the truth" that is rarely seen — anywhere.

The book is replete with touching, heartwarming, and sometimes heart-rending episodes, such as when he rejects the advances of a beautiful woman for the sake of his quest, or when he tearfully bids his harmonica goodbye, throwing it, once and for all, into the River Ganges, or when he meets his eternal guru. All such scenes are recreated for the reader with deep emotion and storytelling expertise. Both descriptive writing and perceptive analysis are plentiful in this book, making it a precious gem that will enrich the reader with its shining brilliance.

The meeting with his eternal guru is, in many ways, the most pivotal episode in the book. It was on this momentous occasion that all he had learned would suddenly gel for him. The Indian print of Lord Krishna which our young seeker had carried with him for many months, uncontrollably attracted to it, now had personality and definition — it was the Supreme Lord as evoked in the Hare Krishna maha-mantra. This sacred chant, too, was something he had carried around for many moons, having mystically received it through the grace of the Ganges River. But now, by his guru's grace, he was able to connect the form with the mantra, and the Godhead with His spiritual sound vibration. It all came together, like the three rivers — the Ganges, the Yamuna, and the Saraswati — in Prayaga. Still, his quest continued, even after meeting his master, just so he could be sure that he had left no stones unturned.

But it was in his master's eyes that he found his way home. This is where he discovered the true depth of the Ganges and the ultimate meaning of the Himalayan masters; the value of lineage holders and the wisdom of the Vedas; the secrets of mysticism and the heart of devotion. His master's very being spoke of purpose, mission, and unending love. Home, too, was in Vrindavana, Lord Krishna's holy playground, which embodied his master's essence.

Throughout this work, we find the author's culminating realizations, as well as correspondence written to family from distant lands, set apart from the rest of the text, both with italics and with inset block quotes. These are often pithy and rich, thought-provoking and even profound. In fact, the block quotes, along with the book's picture sections, showing the author as a youth, with family and friends

— so one can visualize the main players in his life — and with spiritual "celebrities," such as the Dalai Lama and others, add immeasurably to the book's overall effect.

* * *

After trekking for months through hostile lands, often barely escaping with his life, he approaches the threshold of an eternal and magical realm where, realizing that he has at last reached the precipice of his spiritual goals, and of bhakti, or devotional mysticism, he makes the astonishing and almost anticlimactic decision to leave. He returns back to the world from which he came in order to share what he has learned.

It is an extraordinary choice, given what he survived to get there: a journey filled with bizarre and often dangerous characters; mystical, life-altering experiences; treacherous encounters that left permanent marks on him and on those around him. The narrative of that journey unfolds as an engaging tale, a love story, and an education in spiritual reality in all its forms. We are with him through solitude, when he stumbles upon saintly and accomplished teachers, and as he experiences moments of splendor and enlightenment. The fact the he graphically and effectively conveys all this is quite an achievement for a first-time author.

The act of turning back, of potentially denying one's own salvation so that the world may benefit, holds a revered place in most wisdom cultures. Bodhisattvas, the "enlightened beings" of Buddhism, are motivated by such a wish and forego their own entrance into nirvana, the state of enlightenment, in order to work for the progress of society. In the Jewish faith, the tzaddikim or "righteous" men and women (tzidkanit) are great souls who strive to uplift the oppressed and establish justice. The history of Christianity bears testimony to the price paid by Christian mystics, apostles and martyrs who served as conduits for the spirit of God in the world. And in India, the title sadhu is awarded to learned spiritualists who embody the holy life and serve as teachers and guides.

Not all sadhus risk their spiritual attainment to help others.

In traditional India, there are basically two types of sadhus. One type is called bhajananandi. These are sadhus who shun society and live in forests or caves, where they devote all their days to intense penance, rigid study, and sing bhajans, or sacred hymns. They remain aloof from money matters, their diet is austere, and for most seekers of enlightenment, their path is impossible to follow. The other sadhus are known as goshtanandi. These sadhus travel to populated cities to give everyone a chance to hear about God and the principles of a holy life. Their path requires them to confront one of the greatest challenges of the divine call, namely, how to live a holy life in utterly unholy surroundings. They show it is possible to remain egoless in an ego-driven environment. Simply put, their teaching is as follows: how to be both in the world and yet not of it.

According to a brief Author's Note at the back of his book, Radhanath Swami emerged from his years of travel wanting to explain to others the beauty and mystery of what he had discovered, and therein lay a dilemma. Judging by this very intimate account, he is a shy soul who finds it uncomfortable when a spotlight is focused on him. Writing an autobiography was just not his style, but he undertook the exercise in response to appeals made by a number of his admirers. One friend in particular, Bhakti Tirtha Swami (1950–2005), was also one of the few people in the world who knew the full scope of Radhanath's odyssey. In 2005, as Bhakti Tirtha Swami lay dying from cancer, he made a request. He asked Radhanath to set aside his reservations and write the story of his journey to God. At first Radhanath refused, saying that writing about his own life would be "sheer arrogance."

"Don't be miserly," Bhakti Tirtha told him. "Share what has been given to you." He passed away two days later.

In some ways, Radhanath Swami's hesitation over coming back into the world after his discovery of bhakti was justified. After all, having gone through the numerous experiences related in this book, his was now the peaceful and fulfilling life of an accomplished recluse; why take a step backward into the drudgery of material life? Associating with those focused on sense gratification, he knew, would engender the worst of risks. But his ultimate choice, in terms of path and teacher, tells the story. At this point, we can let the name be known: by selecting Srila A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (1896–1977), a pure devotee — an activist, who lived only to help others — as his guru (after declining offers of initiation from several yogis and other adepts in the Himalayas and elsewhere), Radhanath Swami cast his fate to the wind, cut his matted locks, and bought a ticket back to America. More than a symbolic gesture of moving away from the mindset of physically renouncing the world, these were first steps toward an "engaged" form of devotion. This contemporary strain of

the bhakti tradition maintains that people who are aware of their spiritual identity must help to reduce suffering in the world around them. They must share what they have been given.

* * *

Every recent generation has had its best-selling mystic guidebook, often focusing on the life of an exemplary seeker. The 1940s gave us works on the lives of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, as well as Paramahansa Yogananda's now classic Autobiography of a Yogi . Thomas Merton's Seven Storey Mountain, detailing the Trappist monk's quest and spiritual accomplishments, came soon after that. The following decades produced a slew of mystic accounts, most prominent among them being Carlos Castaneda's series on Yaqui shaman Don Juan Matus, and the cult classic Miracle of Love: Stories About Neem Karoli Baba. The Ochre Robe, an autobiography written by Agehananda Bharati, dominated the genre in the 1980s — and there were many others.

These first autobiographical works, as listed above, focused on Shaktas or the neo-Hinduism associated with Advaita Vedanta, or on yogis, as in the case of Yogananda. For a Christian hagiography, Merton was decidedly more modern in his approach. Biographical tales of Yaqui shaman mysticism and of Neem Karoli Baba, both, were tinged by the psychedelic mode of the 1960s and by generic Hinduism. Agehananda was a Dasanami sannyasi, following in the philosophical traditions of Shankara.

The next generation belongs to The Journey Home. Like its predecessors, it offers readers an intimate look into a true seeker's life, and into the tradition he ultimately chose to follow. But what is unique here is that the tradition of choice is Vaishnavism. The books mentioned above, and so many others like them, invariably sidestep the Vaishnava tradition. There may, of course, be many reasons for this: those focusing on Western spirituality need not look at the Vaishnava sages and their theological background at all. It simply does not figure into their survey. But the Eastern texts are another story. With Vaishnavism accounting for the vast majority of "Hindu" practitioners in the world today — a statistic that was initially brought to light by Agehananda Bharati himself — its omission from the pages of the world's spiritual biographies is inexcusable.

That being said, the time has finally come for Vaishnavism to be given its due, and there is hardly a more worthy representative than Radhanath Swami. Indeed, he has learned from and appreciated every single religious leader and tradition that has crossed his path. He views reality in an unabashedly pluralistic way, never discounting the value and merits of any genuine form of esoteric spirituality. He is non-judgmental in the best, most enlightened way: as a Saragrahi Vaishnava, one who looks to the essence, seeing all religion as just so many roads to the same goal, which is, of course, God. This makes him a superlative Vaishnava, indeed. Thus, The Journey Home stands tall in the long line of spiritual classics mentioned above, and it richly deserves to be there. It, too, has found a home.

“You Gotta Help Me, Satch!”: The Transformation of Richard Dixon

In memory of my loving friend, Srila Narayana Maharaja

When my friend Marino and I joined the New York ISKCON ashram in late 1972, we brought a whole troupe of interesting characters with us. Not all of them took it as seriously as we did — some would just visit regularly, chanting and reading Srila Prabhupada’s books. Richard Dixon, a close friend of Marino’s, was one of those chosen few. He would visit us regularly, but was never able to make a real commitment to the yoga of Krishna Consciousness. At one point, he did move into ISKCON’s Puerto Rico ashram; his tenure there, however, was brief, lasting a few weeks at the most.

As years passed, he eventually married and had a little baby girl, Tara. The family became regular temple-goers, as Krishna Consciousness became more a part of their life. Then, toward the end of 1997, Richard discovered that he had a terminal form of cancer. The future did not look bright, and the doctors made it clear that he didn’t have long to live.

At this point, he and I had had many exchanges about the inevitability of death, and he confided in me that his only regret in life was that he was not formally initiated, and thus not properly linked to a Sampradaya (a genuine spiritual lineage). He said that if I could arrange this for him, he would strictly follow the principles of bhakti-yoga until he died, and that, despite his checkered past, he would not let me down.

While he always deeply believed in the philosophy of Krishna Consciousness, he was never able to follow most of the strictures of its practice, and he spent much time on the fringes of the movement. Because of this, he never developed a relationship with senior ISKCON devotees, and the gurus of the movement had no idea who he was. Still, he was determined, and he left me with the words, “You gotta help me, Satch!”

I was faced with a dilemma: my lifelong friend wanted to do the right thing before he died. He wanted to commit to the process of Krishna Consciousness and take initiation from a bona fide spiritual master, which is an important part of the practice. However, knowing ISKCON’s standards for initiation, and knowing, too, Richard’s distance from the movement’s leaders, I had no idea where to turn.

My first response was to call my close friend Dhanurdhar Swami and ask him to initiate Richard. After I explained the whole situation to him, he sympathized with Richard’s plight but felt that I should approach other qualified devotees. After all, the GBC had temporarily revoked his authority to initiate (a long story in itself), and so he was insistent that I look elsewhere.

I began to feel that Richard himself should make the decision, and since his condition was worsening at a rapid pace, I decided to talk to him at length about the various prospects right away. As we spoke about his possible choices for a guru, he expressed doubt about formalizing a relationship that never existed. He had had no real exchange with ISKCON leaders and felt that he could not realistically take initiation from a person whom he did not know, or who did not know him.

“Besides,” he said, “I know their standards. They’re not going to want to initiate me.” Nonetheless, there were several that he was considering — ISKCON leaders in whom he seemed to have great faith. But, in the course of conversation, when Srila Narayana Maharaja’s name came up, his eyes opened wide: “Yes, he was Prabhupada’s friend, very close to him. And he’s a saint from Vrindavana. I want him. Can you arrange it, Satch?” It didn’t matter to him that he didn’t really know Narayana Maharaja, or that Narayana Maharaja didn’t know him. He was simply attracted to the Swami’s saintliness and to his closeness to Prabhupada. He was willing to go for it.

By Krishna’s divine arrangement, Srila Narayana Maharaja was planning to come to New York that upcoming weekend. This in itself was somewhat miraculous, since he didn’t come to New York all that often. And since Maharaja and I had had an ongoing correspondence and a friendly relationship, I knew that I could, conceivably, meet with him and arrange the initiation.

As a well-wisher of ISKCON, I was besieged by mixed emotions. On the one hand, Narayana Maharaja was an excellent choice, a pure devotee who could certainly deliver his disciples back to Godhead. On the other, he had been involved in some bitter disputes with ISKCON’s leadership, and I had to consider fidelity to Prabhupada’s movement. What to do? I decided that, as part of a movement, I could not make a unilateral decision. But time was passing quickly, and Richard’s was running out. So I immediately consulted two leading ISKCON devotees with whom I was quite close.

To my surprise, they both affirmed that I should go ahead and arrange the initiation, if possible. They reasoned that most of ISKCON's disagreements with Narayana Maharaja focused on political and organizational differences, and that, since Richard was dying, and since this was his final request, why not try to fulfill it?

My course was clear: that Saturday, June 6, 1998, I ventured into the building on New York's Lower East Side where Srila Narayana Maharaja was staying. It was a wonderful reunion. We discussed our book project, which never materialized — we were going to co-author a question-and-answer book, wherein I would ask him to elaborate on esoteric details about the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition, but since he was in usually in Braj and I was in New York, we agreed that it was impractical to do this through the mail — and many other subjects. Gradually, I told him of Richard Dixon's desire.

His first suggestion was that I initiate Richard myself. But I told him that I was clearly unqualified to be anyone's guru, let alone someone with whom I had an equal, one-on-one friendship. He disagreed. We chuckled and discussed the importance of Guru Tattva, and how all devotees must sooner or later act as guru. He again insisted that I do it. But I just told him outright: I simply could not initiate at this time. He looked at me sternly, and then he laughed. "I know what I have to do," he smiled. "And I will do it." With great compassion, he said to me that he was not intending to initiate while in New York, but that he would do this because I was asking him to. He said he would take it as a service, since I was requesting it. "Bring the boy tomorrow," he said.

By this time, Richard was partially paralyzed from the cancer, which had invaded his spine and nervous system. Nonetheless, Richard, helped by his wife, Maria, and his brother Joseph, arrived, and we went to see Narayana Maharaja together. As we walked in, Maharaja was giving class, but he still greeted me warmly and affectionately, as he always did. He gestured that we should come in, and we listened for the remainder of the lecture. Then, after it was over, he asked everyone to leave. At this time, I introduced Richard, Maria and Joseph to Narayana Maharaja. He humbly asked Joseph to stay in the next room, as this would be a particularly confidential ceremony. Joseph said that he understood, and he excused himself.

In the room now were only Maharaja, myself, Richard and Maria, and Naveen Krishna, Maharaja's highly qualified assistant (now Madhava Maharaja), hovering in the background. Maharaja gestured that I should come sit with him, facing the new initiate. He asked them some friendly, personal questions, and concluded by telling them that he was now their father, and they were his children. (Maria, Richard's wife, was now to be unexpectedly be initiated as well!) He explained the maha-mantra in great detail. To summarize, he said that anyone who steals can be called Hari, but that the greatest thief is God, because He can steal one's heart. But greater than Him is Radhika, because She can steal even His heart. In this way he described the various levels in understanding the maha-mantra. He kept looking over at me, sitting on a cushion right next to his, inches away, offering that I could add to his talk. But there was no need.

He said that they should chant with complete attentiveness. They should see themselves as if in a well, he said, as if they were in a deep hole in the ground. There are well-meaning people outside the well, and they should chant as if they are calling out to these people, who are their only hope for extricating themselves from this deep, dark well of material life. They should chant like this incessantly, he insisted, and he encouraged them to chant as many rounds as possible. He said that sixty-four or thirty-two rounds might not be possible, but that they should chant as many as they could, perhaps sixteen, eight, or four, according to their capacity, but that they should be regulated.

He also gave them the confidential Gopal mantra — although he assured them that, in doing this, he was not giving them second initiation — and he told them to chant it in the morning and evening, and when they offer food (which, he said, could be offered to Prabhupada, since they were trained in Krishna Consciousness through ISKCON). He said that, because of Richard's condition, he may not see them again, so he wanted them to have this very powerful mantra to help them in spiritual life. He then took their hands, with my assistance, and personally showed them how to chant the more esoteric mantra on their fingers. When he saw the severe state of Richard's paralysis and that he was unable to use his fingers in the appropriate way, Maharaja compassionately said, "Never mind, you can just chant it without the fingers, or you can even just mentally repeat the mantra."

He spent a good deal of time with them, and told them to consult with me if they had any questions. And then he turned to me and asked me to look out for them and to give them spiritual guidance throughout their lives. He also asked them to avoid any kind of politics or controversy, and to work with ISKCON and to be happy in Krishna Consciousness. Throughout his talk, he repeated several

times to them: “So, are you happy? If not, please be happy.” His concern was genuine and pure.

Richard became “Radhe Shyam Dasa,” and Maria became “Madhuri Devi Dasi.” With intense appreciation (Radhe Shyam Prabhu was visibly crying), they left. It was a very personal and heart-warming initiation. I remained to ask more confidential questions about our Sampradaya, and at that time, again, Maharaja asked me to please give them guidance on his behalf.

The days that followed were rough. But Radhe Shyam was a man empowered. He had the twin virtues of personal determination and guru-kripa, the mercy of a bona fide spiritual master. It was clear to me that Narayana Maharaja had entered his life and enabled him to face what was in store. As he went through courses of chemotherapy and radiation, his condition worsened and he suffered horrible side effects. But Krishna continued to make one arrangement after another for him. If we look back, it is actually quite amazing: He wanted initiation from Narayana Maharaja, and Maharaja happened to be in town that weekend — although, again, he hardly ever comes to New York. And Radhe Shyam was able to get to the initiation because he was still able to walk. One or two days after the ceremony, he was confined to a wheelchair. That next weekend, I asked him to come see Lord Jagannatha at the New York Ratha-yatra. He was able to come and see the Lord, and right after that, he was confined to his bed at home.

I asked him to turn his room into Vrindavana. This he did by playing a constant tape of Srila Prabhupada chanting the maha-mantra, and by having his wife and friends put up pictures of Radha-Krishna, Lord Chaitanya, and Srila Prabhupada all over his room. He also held two pictures of Narayana Maharaja, that I had given him, close by at all times. As I repeatedly entered that room, I was amazed how the atmosphere was reminiscent of the mood of Braj.

Radhe Shyam’s determination to remain Krishna conscious at this point was uncanny. Although it was difficult for him to speak, he would chant along with the tape whenever possible. I brought many leading ISKCON devotees to engage in kirtan with him. Romapada Swami and his disciple Govinda, Dhanurdhar Swami, Sridhara Swami (now deceased), Vaiyasaki Prabhu (the famous kirtaniya), Ramabhadra Prabhu (the New York temple president), Narada-rishi Prabhu, Hladini-shakti Prabhu, and many other devotees were there as well. Each time Radhe Shyam would try to chant along with the kirtan, the devotees would tell him that he need only hear, that if it was too painful to chant, he need simply listen. But, no. Like Haridasa Thakura, he kept trying to chant, even though the pain was quite intense. This was his determination.

Another miracle: staying at the New York ISKCON temple at this time was a trained devotee-nurse, Shaibya, who was given permission to go to his home and take care of him in those final days. She administered pain medication and made it easier for him to breathe. The various devotees present would take turns reading to him from Srila Prabhupada’s Bhagavad Gita, Srimad Bhagavatam and Krishna Book. Since the cancer was in his spinal cord, the doctors chose a medication that stops pain in that particular area, but not in the brain, like many other pain medicines. This enabled him to remain fully conscious, and he would periodically react to the readings or the kirtan.

For the last several days, he did not want anyone to enter the room who was not a Vaishnava, although he seems to have made me the only exception. His family members could come in, but, by this time, they were chanting and engaged in Krishna-katha. Everyone around him was transformed for the better. But his transformation was the greatest. He had become completely determined to focus on Krishna during these crucial moments, and he did so. On June 28, 1998, Marino, Madhuri, and Shaibya were watching him closely as he took his last breath, while he was focused squarely on the two pictures of Srila Narayana Maharaja, his Gurudeva. Madhuri had just put a tulasi leaf on his tongue, and he returned to Krishna, and is most probably now in Bhauma-Vrindavan.

Part V: Mantras and Music

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“Hare Krishna”: The Scriptural Basis for the Greatest of All Mantras

Of all kirtan mantras, there is one that stands supreme. It is the main prayer of the Hare Krishna movement: Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare/ Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare, which is translated as “O Lord! O energy of the Lord! Please engage me in your divine service.” It is traditionally called the maha-mantra, or “great mantra,” because it contains and yet surpasses all other sacred sounds, and because it is a completely pure and selfless prayer; it asks only for service to the Supreme Lord and wants nothing else in return.

This being the case, it is surprising that the Srimad Bhagavatam, the Bhagavad Gita, and the Chaitanya Charitamrita, the three most important texts of the Hare Krishna movement (and, arguably, of Vaishnava spirituality in general), do not quote the mantra even once. Of course, Srila Prabhupada, in his “purports” (commentary) and sometimes in his translations, lets us know when a verse is implying the maha-mantra, even if the Sanskrit and Bengali do not explicitly mention it. As an acharya, or exemplary teacher in disciplic succession, his explanations incorporate the context of the vast gamut of Vedic teachings, as well as the insights of the saints and sages of the past.

While the central texts mentioned above do not include direct references to the maha-mantra, they certainly glorify the chanting of the holy name. But I decided that, for those who want to know, it would be useful to explore the explicit references to the maha-mantra in scriptural texts. Some of my findings appear below. For the earliest references, I include the Sanskrit, especially for those specialists who may doubt my translation. For later quotes garnered from the Hare Krishna or Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition, I give only the English, since the entire later tradition would endorse the translations given here.

Why the Silence?

To my knowledge, no acharya in the Krishna tradition has ever explained just why the central texts neglect to mention the full maha-mantra. Perhaps the acharyas considered the question unimportant. After all, our main scriptures glorify the chanting of the holy name, even if the maha-mantra is absent. Furthermore, scriptures and teachers in the tradition talk about the confidentiality of certain mantras. Sri Sanatana Goswami, for example, writes in his Dig-darshini commentary on the Brihad-Bhagavatamrta that such mantras should be chanted only by qualified persons who have received them through proper initiation. He says that, even when certain scriptures discuss these mantras, special efforts are often made to disguise their exact syllables, or their explanation is purposely made difficult to understand for those unfamiliar with the cryptic codes of transcendental literature. Krishnadasa Kaviraja Goswami, the author of the Chaitanya Charitamrita, Sri Chaitanya’s most authoritative biography, expresses a similar idea (Adi 4. 231–232): “All these conclusions are unfit to disclose in public. But if they are not disclosed, no one will understand them. Therefore, I shall mention them, revealing only their essence, so that loving devotees will understand them but fools will not.”

In other words, the scriptures and sages sometimes reveal esoteric mantras such as the maha-mantra, and sometimes they do not. So the question becomes not so much why the central texts do not mention the mantra, but why other texts do. The answer is, as Krishnadasa Kaviraja Goswami says, so that sincere souls will be able understand it. Also, great saints, in their ecstasy, are sometimes unable to contain themselves, and so the maha-mantra slips through. For these reasons and others, the full mantra appears in sacred texts and in the writings of the sages. That being said, there are no restrictions for chanting the maha-mantra and, once properly received, the practice of chanting is easy and blissful.

Who Cares?

Someone might ask, “Who cares? If the tradition teaches that chanting Hare Krishna is central to the practice of Krishna Consciousness, the topmost yoga system, why does it matter if the maha-mantra is not found in the movement’s most important texts?” In one sense, it doesn’t matter. And yet, Krishna Consciousness, Vaishnavism, is a scripturally based tradition. All truth is gauged by reference to three authorities: the guru, the scriptures, and the sages, especially the great spiritual teachers in the disciplic succession. If these three do not tally, the tradition teaches, then something is amiss. In the

Vaishnava tradition, gurus and sages attest to the importance of the maha-mantra. But do the scriptures? A quick reading might suggest that they do not, even if the references are highly suggestive. The most important texts, as we have noted, speak of the holy name, but never mention the maha-mantra directly. It is only in what scholars deem "later" literature that the mantra is generally found.

Modern scholars from outside the tradition say that the four Vedas and the Upanishads constitute the oldest of the Vedic texts, called shruti, whereas the Puranas and the epics came later. Consequently, so the theory goes, Vaishnavism, or Krishna Consciousness, came later too, for its specific practice is mentioned only in the "later" texts.

Scholars arrive at these conclusions by using their own system of checks and balances, one less reliable than the one composed of gurus, sages, and scriptures. They use techniques of comparative and historical linguistics in conjunction with references to texts whose dates are known with greater certainty. Naturally, these methods are open to error, and scholars will generally admit this quite openly.

Practitioners and scholars from within the tradition, however, teach that Krishna Consciousness is eternal, and that Vedic texts, whether old or new, are based on an oral tradition revealed at the dawn of time. The maha-mantra is certainly part of the Vedic oral tradition. Furthermore, the mantra itself, as well as references to it, can indeed be found in "old" Vedic texts that have survived through the ages.

The Earliest References

1. The Pippalada branch of the Atharva Veda states:

svannma-mula-mantrena
sarvam hladayati vibhuhu
sa eve mulam-mantram japati
haririti krishna iti rama iti

"The name of God is the root of all mantras, a splendid thing that brings joy to all. This root mantra is chanted with the words hari, krishna, and rama."

2. The Kali-santarana Upanishad, part of the Yajur Veda, states:

hare krishna hare krishna
krishna krishna hare hare
hare rama hare rama
rama rama hare hare

iti shodashakam namnam
kali-kalmasha-nashanam
natah parataropayah
sarva-vedeshu drishyate

"The sixteen names of the Hare Krishna maha-mantra, Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare/ Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare, destroy the iniquities of the Kali age. This is the ultimate conclusion of all the Vedas."

The context of the above quote is important: this Upanishadic text is a dialogue between Brahma, the first created being, and Narada, his disciple, who asks him about the most effective means to attain liberation in the current age. Brahma answers with the above verse. And in a prior verse, he informs Narada that the maha-mantra is "the real secret of the Vedic literature," thus underlining the mantra's confidential nature and its importance for the Vaishnava tradition.

3. The Rama-tapani Upanishad (1.6) explains each of the names of the maha-mantra in the following way:

harati tri-vidham tapam
janma-koti-shatodbhavam

papam ca smaratam yasmat
tasmad dharir iti smritaha

"The Lord is known as Hari because he takes away the sins, as well as the three types of suffering that result from them, of those who remember him. These are sins that are accumulated over millions of births."

krishir bhur-vacakah shabdo
nash ca nirvriti-shucakaha
tayor aikyam param brahma
krishna ity abhidhiyate

“The root krish indicates supreme attractiveness; the suffix na points to ultimate joy. Thus, the name Krishna indicates the Supreme Brahman [spirit], who is the culmination of both attractiveness and joy.”

ramante yogino ‘nante
satyanande chid-atmani
iti rama-padenasau
param brahmabhidhiyate

“Yogis, or those desiring to link with God, take pleasure in the Supreme Self who manifests as an absolute form of eternity, knowledge, and bliss. That same truth, known as the Parabrahman, is also called Rama.”

4. The Chaitanya Upanishad (verses 11–12), part of the Atharva Veda, tells us that the Hare Krishna maha-mantra is made up entirely of Krishna’s names:

sa eva mula-mantram japati harir iti krishna iti rama iti

“The original seed-mantra consists of the names, Hari, Krishna, and Rama.”

harati hridaya-granthim vasana-rupam iti harih. krishih smarane tac ca nas tad ubhaya-melanam iti krishnah. ramayati sarvam iti rama ananda-rupah. atra shloko bhavati

“Hari is he who removes the knot in the heart [which is none other than] material desire. One can unite with the Lord by remembering the root krish and the suffix na, which gives us the ultimate song of praise: Krishna, and Rama is he who gives pleasure to everything and is the form of bliss.”

Because the word hare is the vocative case for both hari (a name for Krishna) and hara (a name for Radha), some texts, such as the one just quoted, interpret “Hare” in the maha-mantra as a call to Krishna. Later commentators, however, insist that, in its most far-reaching and spiritually sublime interpretation, Hare refers to Radha, Krishna’s eternal consort and the very embodiment of His spiritual pleasure potency. The Gaudiya Vaishnava acharya Sri Jiva Goswami points us in this direction when, in his explanation of the maha-mantra, the maha-mantratha-vyakhya, he writes (verses 1 and 2):

hare krishna hare krishna
krishna krishna hare hare
hare rama hare rama
rama rama hare hare

sarva-ceta-harah krishnas
tasya cittam haraty asau
vaidagdhi-sara-vistarair
ato radha hara mata

“Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare/ Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare. Krishna steals the minds of all living beings [which is the meaning of “Hari”], but Radharani steals even His mind through Her hidden, mystical talents. Therefore She is known as Hara, as in the maha-mantra.”

5. The Ananta-samhita, another ancient text, tells us:

hare krishna hare krishna
krishna krishna hare hare
hare rama hare rama
rama rama hare hare

shodashaitani namani
dvatrimshad varnakani hi
kalau yuge maha-mantrah
sammato jivatarane

varjayitva tu namaitad

durjanaih parikalpitam
chandobaddham susiddhanta
viruddham nabhyaset padam

tarakam brahma-namaitad
brahmana gurunadina
kalisantaranadyasu
shruti-svadhigatam hareh

praptam sri brahma-shishyena
sri naradena dhimata
namaitad-uttamam shrauta-
paramparyena brahmanaha

utsrijyaitan-maha-mantram
ye tvanyat kampitaµ padam
mahanameti gayanti
te shastra-guru langhanaha
tattva-virodha-sampriktam
tadrisam daurjanam matam
sravatha pariharyam syad
atma-hitarthina sada

hare krishna hare krishna
krishna krishna hare hare
hare rama hare rama
rama rama hare hare

"Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare/ Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare. This sixteen-name, thirty-two syllable mantra is the maha-mantra in the age of Kali, and it is by this mantra that all living beings can be delivered. One should never forsake this mantra and adopt other so-called religious processes practiced by less qualified souls. Nor should one chant concocted combinations of Krishna's names that contradict the pure conclusions of the scriptures or are filled with incongruent emotions.

"Regarding this divinely spiritual maha-mantra, which frees one from material existence, the original guru, Lord Brahma, has said, 'The Kali-santarana Upanishad has declared this mantra to be the best means of deliverance in the age of Kali.' Having heard all this from Brahma, his sons and disciples, beginning with Narada, all qualified souls accepted the Hare Krishna maha-mantra and, having meditated on it, attained perfection."

6. The Brahma Yamala is a tantric literature, or an ancient book of instruction on rituals. In the Brahma Yamala one finds the following:

harim vina nasti kinchat
papani-starakam kalau
tasmal-lokoddharanartham
hari-nama prakashayet

sarvatra muchyate loko
maha-papat kalau yuge
hare-krishna-pada-dvandvam
krishneti ca pada-dvayam

tatha hare-pada-dvandvam
hare-rama iti dvayam
tad-ante ca maha-devi
rama rama dvayam vadet

hare hare tato bruyad
harinama samud dharet
maha-mantram ca krishnasya
sarva papa pranashakam iti

"Without Hari, there is no way to eradicate the sins of the age of Kali, and therefore it is essential that the name of Hari (hari-nama) should reverberate in all the worlds. By this reverberation, all dimensions can be released from the great sins of the age of Kali. First one should twice chant 'Hare Krishna,' then twice 'Krishna,' then twice 'Hare,' then twice 'Hare Rama,' and in the end, O Mahadevi, one should chant 'Rama' twice, and then 'Hare Hare.' In this way one should pronounce Krishna's hari-nama maha-mantra, which destroys all sins."

7. From the Radha Tantra:

shrinu matarmahamaye
vishva-bija-svarupini
hari namno mahamaye
kramam vad sureshvari

"Hear me, O mother Mahamaya, seed of the universe, mistress of the gods! I ask you to please explain the sequence of hari-nama."

hare krishna hare krishna
krishna krishna hare hare
hare rama hare rama
rama rama hare hare

dvatrimshad aksharanyeva
kalau namani sarvadam
etan mantram suta shreshtha
prathamam shrinuyan naraha

"Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare/ Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare. O best of sons, this is how you should chant these thirty-two syllables and sixteen names in the age of Kali. This mantra should be heard by all human beings."

8. Dhyanacandra Goswami, an early follower of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, refers to an old Vedic text in describing the Hare Krishna maha-mantra in his Gaura-govindarchana-smarana-paddhati (132-136):

There are three Krishna mantras that are very pure and powerful. They are famous for bestowing love of God on their chanters. The Sanat-kumara-samhita refers to the first mantra: "The words Hare Krishna are repeated twice, and then Krishna and Hare are both separated and repeated twice in the same way. After that, Hare Rama, Rama, and Hare are repeated twice as well. The mantra thus flows as follows: Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare/ Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare."

The meditation that accompanies this maha-mantra is also found in the Sanat-kumara-samhita: "Sri Krishna is playing in the cooling waters of the Yamuna or in the shade of a kadamba tree in the beautiful Vrindavana forest. He is accompanied by cows and cowherd boys, and by Sri Radha. He is very skillful at playing the flute, as he stands in a charming three-bending pose, always bestowing mercy and kindness upon the devotees."

9. Gopala Guru Goswami, Dhyanacandra's successor, quotes from the Brahmanda Purana, which discusses the names in the maha-mantra:

The Lord is known as Hari because he takes away the ignorance of His devotees. Indeed, He reveals to them His actual nature and His personal spiritual form, dispelling all ignorance forever.

Because Radha, the joy of Krishna's life, steals His mind, She is known by the name Hara.

The dark, lotus-eyed Lord, the possessor of the highest bliss, who brings pleasure to Gokula — this son of Nanda is known as Krishna. He is also known as Rama because He experiences the fullness of conjugal bliss, and also because He is the visible divinity of loving pastimes, bringing indescribable pleasure to Sri Radha.

The maha-mantra **in Later Literature**

While the above represent the few references to the maha-mantra in the earliest Vedic and post-Vedic

texts, the vast majority of such references appear in the later corpus of Vaishnava literature. In such references, the maha-mantra is sometimes presented in its entirety, but alternately a "shorthand" reference to the maha-mantra appears simply with the words "Hare Krishna." Here are but a few examples of both:

1. Rupa Goswami, chief among Chaitanya Mahaprabhu's primary associates, praises the chanting of Hare Krishna in his Laghu-Bhagavatamrita (1.4): "The syllables 'Hare Krishna' emanated from the mouth of Sri Chaitanya Himself, drowning the universe in love of God. Let these names be glorified!"
2. Sri Rupa longs to again attain the audience of Sri Chaitanya, who is always chanting Hare Krishna. He writes in Stavamala, Prathama Caitanyashtakam (5): "When will Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, whose tongue is always dancing by loudly chanting Hare Krishna; who counts the number of times he chants on the wonderful strip of cloth from around his waist, tied with knots for chanting; whose eyes are so large that they seem to wrap around to reach his ears; and whose arms extend down to His knees, again become visible to me?"
3. Baladeva Vidyabhushan, an important Eighteenth-century teacher in the Gaudiya tradition, confirms in his Stava-mala-vibhushana-bhashya that the "Hare Krishna" in the verse by Rupa Goswami just quoted refers to the thirty-two-syllable maha-mantra: "The Hare Krishna mantra was resounding in Chaitanya Mahaprabhu's mouth. The mantra consisting of sixteen names and thirty-two syllables was dancing on His tongue."
4. Raghunath Das Goswami, one of the famous six Goswamis of Vrindavana, writes in his Shachi-Sunvashtakam (5): "When will that son of Mother Shachi [Sri Chaitanya] — who, taking the residents of Bengal as his own, inspired them to chant Hare Krishna a prescribed number of times daily and who, like a father, gave them many cherished instructions — again become visible to me?"
5. Sarvabhauma Bhattacharya, an intimate associate of Lord Chaitanya, states in his Chaitanya-shatakam (64): "Seeing the people of the world afflicted by the sins of the age of Kali, Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu personally gave them the holy name and ordered them to perform loud congregational chanting of this maha-mantra while dancing and playing musical instruments."
6. The following instance of Sri Chaitanya's chanting of the maha-mantra is found in the Chaitanya Mangala of Lochan Das: "Once, Mahaprabhu visited the home of a Brahmin and embraced him. The kirtan that followed made that home become just like Vrindavana, and a multitude of people gathered to hear and chant the holy names: Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare/ Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare."
7. In the Chaitanya-bhagavata (2.23.75–78), the earliest biography of Lord Chaitanya, Vrindavana Das Thakur quotes the maha-mantra directly: "The Lord ordered everyone in great joy, 'Listen to the maha-mantra of Krishna's names: Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare/ Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare. I spoke this maha-mantra. Perform japa of this mantra a prescribed number of times. All perfection will be attained through this. Chant this mantra at every moment. There is no other rule."
8. Again, in Chaitanya-bhagavata (1.14.143–147), Vrindavana Das Thakur quotes Lord Chaitanya's instructions to Tapan Mishra: "Everything is accomplished by hari-nama-sankirtan, including the goal of life and the means for its attainment. In this age of Kali, the only means for deliverance is the chanting of the names of Hari. There is no other way, there is no other way, there is no other way. Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare/ Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare. This verse of names is called the maha-mantra. It contains sixteen names of the Lord, consisting of thirty-two syllables. Chanting this mantra again and again will awaken the sprout of pure love of God within the heart. Thus, by chanting, the goal of life and the means for its attainment are understood."

Conclusion

The great acharyas in disciplic succession from Sri Chaitanya have given the world numerous indications and instructions about chanting the maha-mantra. Therefore, although not explicitly quoted in the three primary texts mentioned at the beginning of this article, the implicit reference to the mantra pervades the tradition. The whole of the Srimad-Bhagavatam, in fact, centers on hearing and

chanting Hare Krishna, with many references to hari-kirtan and hari-sankirtan, as does the Bhagavad Gita. Both texts glorify the great souls who know that chanting the Lord's names is the central practice of spiritual life. As for the Chaitanya Charitamrita, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu's most in-depth biography, each turning point in the Lord's life is highlighted by chanting. For example, we learn how the maha-mantra changed his course early on, and how his chanting inspired and illuminated others even in his last days on Earth.

But, as stated earlier, the maha-mantra is meant to be conveyed by a bona fide spiritual master to a sincere disciple. Of course, the tradition teaches that anyone can chant it, and that there are no hard and fast rules for doing so. But Chaitanya Mahaprabhu's own example shows it was not until he received the maha-mantra from Ishvara Puri, his spiritual preceptor, that he became intoxicated with love of God. In other words, the real fruit of the mantra is given by one who already relishes the fruit. And the scriptures, while encouraging a devotee to move towards initiation, will generally only hint at the mantra and its efficacy, the total effect only unleashed when one surrenders to a spiritual teacher in disciplic succession.

That said, let us for a moment revisit the question of why the maha-mantra is not found in the central texts of the Hare Krishna movement. First of all, it was originally a shruti mantra, found in Vedic texts such as the Kali-santarana Upanishad, quoted earlier. This being the case, it was considered a confidential mantra, and as such would normally be revealed implicitly rather than explicitly, as both Sanatana Goswami and Krishnadas Kaviraj Goswami attested to. This would explain why it is not explicitly found in the Srimad Bhagavatam or the Bhagavad Gita, even if these scriptures stress the importance of chanting the holy name of Krishna. However, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu broke open the storehouse of love for God, and in so doing ushered in the true glory of the maha-mantra, in terms of both its unending potency and its accessibility to all who would take it. Indeed, he revealed it to be the special dispensation of the current age of quarrel and hypocrisy.

Why, then, is the maha-mantra not in the Chaitanya Charitamrita? In many ways, this is the real question. The answer? Krishnadas Kaviraj Goswami writes directly that he will not unduly repeat things revealed by the earlier biographer Vrindavan Das Thakur, whom, as we have seen, did indeed mention the maha-mantra. Building on the explicit information of his predecessors, Krishnadas Kaviraj Goswami writes many verses glorifying the chanting of the holy name. When he uses words like hari-nama and maha-mantra, his readers would have known he was referring to the Hare Krishna maha-mantra.

In this way, the scriptures and the great acharyas sometimes reveal the full maha-mantra, and sometimes they do not. But one thing is certain: those who are sincere will eventually receive the holy name and thereby attain perfection.[54]

The Shortcut Home: How Chanting Hare Krishna Effects Self-realization

According to the Vedic literature, pure spiritual beings, each and every one of us, come to this material world in search of wanting to become like the Lord. Wanting to be God, or at least the center of the universe (a position properly reserved only for Krishna), we journey from our original home in the spiritual world, and set up shop, if you will, in the world of three dimensions.

This usually begins in a sophisticated way, with an exalted human birth. As Prabhupada explains, "Originally the living entity is a spiritual being, but when he actually desires to enjoy this material world, he comes down [and] first accepts a body that is human in form." (SB 4.29.4, purport) That first birth is that of Lord Brahma, or as a universal creator of some sort on a higher planetary system, and then we devolve into the lower species, according to our karma. As Srila Prabhupada writes, "Both the Lord and the living entity, being qualitatively spirit soul, have the tendency for peaceful enjoyment, but when the part of the Supreme Personality of Godhead unfortunately wants to enjoy independently, without Krishna, he is put into the material world, where he begins his life as Brahma and is gradually degraded to the status of an ant or a worm in stool." (SB 9.24.58, purport)

As Prabhupada tells us, "This material creation is created by the Lord to give facility to the conditioned souls to fulfill these lustful propensities, and when completely baffled by prolonged lustful activities, the living entities begin to inquire about their real position." (BG 3.37, purport) So, gradually, through the trials and tribulations of life (or, in actuality, lives), we intuit the need for self-realization, and we begin to work our way out of the quagmire of material existence. This interest in self-realization is facilitated by the association of a pure devotee of the Lord, who gradually purifies us and teaches us the ways of transcendence, reminding us of something we once knew long ago.

In general, according to Vedic texts, the process of self-realization involves detached work, philosophical inquiry, and focused attention, or meditation, allowing us to reverse the process of manifestation. That is to say, we retrace our consciousness back through its initial levels of being and development, arriving ultimately at its source. Most traditional systems of yoga thus explain the constituents of the conditioned being — those subtle elements that make up his present state — and, by a process of yoga, seek to bring him back to his original pure state of existence.

Thus, it is not uncommon to hear in a typical yoga class something along these lines: "Pranayama reverses the process of material conditioning. As you breathe, imagine that you are inhaling all auspicious cosmic powers into your bodily vehicle, allowing the breath (prana) to spread throughout. After this, hold in your breath; this is the Kumbhaka phase of breathing, where all higher powers take their residence in each cell, replacing the negativity accrued over lifetimes. Then, when you exhale, which is called the Rechaka phase, imagine that you are getting rid of all unwanted qualities from your system. You simply reverse the process — while you were previous letting them in, now you are letting them out."

While much of this pranayama reversal technique may be wishful thinking — indeed, in this age, it is almost impossible to achieve the desired results of Raja-yoga in any of its forms — it is reminiscent of something that actually takes place during the creation of the universe: the entire process of pranayama seems to be in emulation of Vishnu, the Supreme Lord, who, according to Vedic texts, inhales and exhales to create and annihilate the universes of the material world. That is to say, the entire material sky goes through phases of manifestation and non-manifestation in accordance with the exhalation and inhalation of Maha-Vishnu while He subsists in cosmic slumber. During its manifest stage, when Maha-Vishnu exhales, the material universes come out, and during its unmanifest stage, when He inhales, the material universes are merged into the total material energy, being withdrawn into His transcendental body.

During exhalation, the material elements are created, one by one, and, when He inhales, the elements are absorbed into each other in reverse format. As explained in the Srimad Bhagavatam (11.3.13), "The element earth is transformed into water; and water…is merged into fire." The commentators explain, "The Bhagavatam gives several descriptions of the material creation, by which air is expanded from ether, fire from air, water from fire, and earth from water. Now, in the reverse order, the creation is wound up. Thus earth merges back into the water from which it came, and water similarly merges into fire."

This creation and reversal is elaborated upon in the Samkhya system of philosophy, where truth is understood by analyzing material elements. Samkhya is briefly described in the Bhagavad Gita and in

the Srimad Bhagavatam, and other texts, focusing specifically on this subject, such as the Samkhya-Karika or the Samkhya-Pravachana-Sutram, exist as well. There we learn that Samkhya philosophy regards the universe as consisting of two realities: purusha (consciousness), also known in Vaishnava context as the jiva or the individual soul, and prakriti, the phenomenal realm, or matter. In short, the world consists of the experiencer and the experienced. Some forms of Samkhya recognize a Supreme Being; others do not.

In terms of our present subject, Samkhya says that our sense of material identity is composed of impressions, desires, and activity done in various lifetimes. The Vaishnava saint Rupa Goswami also explains that as we incarnate, again and again, we accumulate various stages of material desires, like stages of the development of a plant, which bear the fruit of our present body, mind, and circumstances of life.

The Samkhyan approach to liberation involves consciously examining the nature of matter and spirit by studying the world through the lens of the shastras. Such philosophical study, called jnana-yoga, gives a person the ability to reverse the world-generating process and allows "pure consciousness" to be released from its material shackles. In Samkhya, when the world comes to an end, a reverse process is set into motion with each effect collapsing back into its cause — that is, the gross physical elements — and ultimately, all of existence goes into a state where the elements, cause, and effect cannot be differentiated from each other, dissolving back into the subtlest forms of prakrti, known as pradhana, or avyakta. Lord Krishna describes this process in Bhagavtam 3.26.10.

Prabhupada describes how a perfect yogi reverses the process of creation. He writes, "It is important to know thoroughly the process of creation as it applies to this cosmic manifestation. Similarly, this body is also created according to the same process by the Supreme Lord. The Personality of Godhead, after entering the universe, creates the cosmic manifestations one after another. Similarly, the living entity, after entering a womb of a mother, also collects his gross and subtle bodies, taking ingredients from the totality of sky, air, fire, water and earth. The words yatha-sthanam vibhagasah indicate that one should know the process of creation and should meditate upon the creative process inversely and thus become free from material contamination." (SB 4.23.16, purport)

Prominent yoga teachers tend to draw heavily on Samkhya philosophy, describing yoga as a process through which we realize our original, untainted consciousness (purusha), independent of the false identity associated with the material body. Through yoga, in fact, the body and mind are clearly perceived as evolutes of the primordial stuff of matter (prakriti), from which they emerge. It is at this point that purusha (with his individual consciousness) comes to realize who he really is, and that he was never really touched by his constantly evolving sense of false identity, that in fact he was always independent of the illusory interplay of the material world, even if he had become falsely identified with it.

However, in previous ages, self-realization was a complicated process. Dismantling our intricate conditioning, accrued over many lives, took herculean effort. The Vedic literature informs us that now things are different: simply by the shortcut of chanting, one can achieve the goal of spiritual life. To quote the Srimad Bhagavatam (12.3.52): whatever result was obtained in Satya-yuga by deeply meditating on Vishnu, spending years in solitude and living austerely; in Treta-yuga by performing elaborate sacrifices, at great expense, using pure ingredients and engaging numerous Brahmins; and in Dvapara-yuga by serving the Lord's lotus feet in the temple (murti-seva), engaging complicated forms of worship — the same results can be obtained in Kali-yuga simply by chanting Hari kirtan. In this day and age, to achieve the lofty goals of yoga, one must engage in bhakti-yoga. Only this will reverse the process.

One might legitimately ask how chanting accomplishes this end. To answer this question, we need to understand that any system of yoga employed in previous ages needed the grace of God, without which all the powers of the mind, meditation, and pious acts would not be effective to revert the yogis back to their pure selves. However, most forms of yoga are an arduous process. And rightly so. We are talking about ridding ourselves of lifetimes of conditioning. Naturally, such a process would take a monumental effort.

On the one hand, no amount of personal endeavor could afford us this spiritual accomplishment. No matter what process of yoga is involved, it is really the grace of God that brings us back to our original, pure state of consciousness. Therefore, the process by which chanting restores the pure self is the direct unlocking of love for God in the heart, through sincerity and attentiveness to the form of God in His holy names. It is a spiritual process that has nothing to do with the material world. As the

Bhagavtam states (3.25.33), “Bhakti, devotional service, dissolves the subtle body of the living entity without separate effort, just as fire in the stomach digests all that we eat.”

Yet there is also something that takes place in the subtle world of prakriti when one chants Krishna’s names, accomplishing the end of freeing us from illusion, situating us beyond the false identities associated with the material body. As Srila Prabhuada writes, “It is stated also in the Vedanta-sutra that sound is the origin of all objects of material possession and that by sound one can also dissolve this material existence. Anavrttih shabdat means “liberation by sound.” The entire material manifestation began from sound, and sound can also end material entanglement, if it has a particular potency. The particular sound capable of doing this is the transcendental vibration Hare Krishna. Our entanglement in material affairs has begun from material sound. Now we must purify that sound in spiritual understanding.” (SB 3.26.32, purport)

This idea is originally revealed in the Kalisantarana Upanishad, an important text that is part of the Yajur Veda . There, we read that Brahma told his son and disciple Narada about the Hare Krishna maha-mantra, “Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare/Hare Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare,” specifically mentioning that it reverses the coverings of the soul:

> iti ñoòaçakaà nämnäà
> kali-kalmaña-näçanaà
> nätaù parataropäyaù
> sarva-vedeñu dåçyate
>
> In this way, the collection of sixteen names recited here is the only destroyer of negativity in Kali-yuga. No other remedy can be found in any part of the Vedic literature.
>
> iti ṣoḍaśa kalāvṛtasya jīvasyāvaraṇa vināśanam
> tataḥ prakāśate paraṁ brahma meghāpaye raviraśmi maṇḍalīveti
>
> Accordingly, the maha-mantra of sixteen names destroys the covering of the jivatma (the soul), which is composed of sixteen constituents. It is only then that Lord Krishna shines before the jiva, like the rays of the sun when a cloud is removed. (Texts 6 & 7)

The sixteen constituents mentioned in this verse are directly enunciated in the Srimad Bhagavatam (4.29.74): “The five sense objects, the five sense organs, the five knowledge-acquiring senses and the mind are the sixteen material components of the living being. These combine with the living entity and are influenced by the three modes of material nature. Thus the existence of the conditioned soul is understood.” In other words, the five sense objects (tan-matras) — namely, sound, form, taste, smell, and touch; the five sense organs (karmendriyas), that is, voice, legs, hands, anus, and genitals; and the knowledge-acquiring senses (jnanendriyas), namely, the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and skin, combine with the mind (manas) to produce the conditioning of the living being — the eternal soul caught in the world of matter. The intelligence (buddhi) and a deeply embedded false sense of self (ahankara) are often added to this list of sixteen.

The chanting of the holy name — sixteen words, composed of thirty-two syllables — purifies these sixteen components of one’s being, along with the other elements, rendering the person who chants free from the conditioning of many lives and eligible for pure devotional service.

As Prabhupada says, “This illusory…material nature can at once be stopped by revival of our Krishna Consciousness.” He continues, “Krishna Consciousness is not an artificial imposition on the mind. This consciousness is the original energy of living entities. When we hear the transcendental vibration, this consciousness is revived.”[55] When we chant, we reverse our original entanglement in the material world. Thus, what was once a grueling, involved process becomes simply a matter of sincerely calling out to the Lord. This is in keeping with the fact that this is a difficult age, a time when our qualifications are lacking and our abilities few. For this reason, the Lord, in His mercy, gives us a simple, shortcut process thorough which we can reverse the manifold forms of conditioning that engulf our soul. Indeed, in this age, it is our short-cut to the perfection of yoga.

Kirtan Yoga: **Nurturing the Sounds of the Soul**

Who hasn't tried conventional yoga? Nearly everyone, at one time or another, has found themselves sitting with eyes closed, in a lotus position, perhaps, engaging various breathing techniques and focusing on some meditational image or conundrum.

But, let's face it — for most of us, it just doesn't happen. As much as we try asana and pranayama, we just cannot lift ourselves to Yogaland, and enlightenment seems predictably far away.

Surely, if we could follow all the rigors of Patanjali's ancient methods, we could bring ourselves to unknown heights of spiritual awakening. If only we could follow the dictums of the yogis of old, we could reach nirvana before we could even say "yoga mats."

But that is the problem: the yogis of old were preaching in a different era, completely unfamiliar with the needs of contemporary (wo)man. Not only that, how many of us are familiar with what they really had to say, anyway? For example, how many people know that there are diverse spiritual techniques recommended for various world ages? By the time our present age started, some 5,000 years ago — or so the wisdom texts of ancient India say — the method was supposed to be Kirtan Yoga, the power of sacred chant, not difficult postures or breathing techniques. This idea is central to all yoga texts. It is an easy process for a difficult age.

And why not? Kirtan is practical. Not everyone has the physical stamina to practice more conventional forms of yoga. But even a child can chant. You open your mouth, and you let your heart sing out. It's blissful and, under proper guidance, easy to perform.

All the senses are involved. The sound engulfs your ears and tongue; you see the other chanters and perhaps gaze at pictures of deities or divine personalities, teachers who have mastered yogic science; the smell of incense or fresh flowers usually find their way into a kirtan environment; you can play cymbals or a small drum, or even clap your hands, so the tactile sense is engaged as well. One can sit meditatively or get up and dance. Kirtan is a full experience.

By chanting, one naturally engages the breath, which is the perfection of pranayama. We chant, and our breathing is controlled by a consistent in-and-out dynamic. The mind is brought under control, too, simply by focusing on the sound — the chitta vrittis, to use yogic terminology, are subdued, thus affording even fledgling practitioners true peace. The fluctuations of a once-disturbed mind are now pacified by the transcendental sound currents. This is because, by chanting, one is essentially glorifying the supreme with carefully passed-down mantras - word-combinations scientifically conceived by the ancients, putting one in direct touch with Divinity. It is the only form of yoga that benefits not only the practitioner, but also anyone within earshot.

In the early stages of the chanting process, one immediately feels good, cleansed, relieved. As one matures in the practice, purification sets in, and an innate happiness rises up in one's heart. Bad habits gradually fall away. In due course, chanting is healing, nurturing, and fundamentally uplifting. It culminates in an overriding sense of love for God and for all living beings.

Little more than a decade ago, few were aware of the virtues of kirtan, even in the yoga community. Today, kirtan events attract yogis and non-yogis alike. Normal, everyday people chill out by listening to kirtan CDs, and popular music artists sample kirtan performances on their albums. Krishna Das, whom Yoga Journal once dubbed "The Pavarotti of Kirtan," and Jai Uttal, an extremely gifted kirtan singer, are arguably the most popular of the genre. But there are many others as well. ISKCON led the way in the 1960s, with its guru, Srila Prabhupada, holding the first kirtan in the Western world in front of a now-famous tree in New York's Tompkins Square Park. Others followed suit, knowingly or unknowingly, and never looked back.

As a result, a new kind of kirtan has emerged: ancient India's sages have called out to us, and we are answering their call, with modern words, rhythms, and beats. This is kirtan, too — a call and response form of yoga. So let all potential yogis go down to a yoga studio and do some chanting, let them flick on a recording, or just chant from their hearts. This is the yoga for the modern age.

Hip-Hop Hinduism: The Spiritual Journey of MC Yogi

MC Yogi is a phenomenon. The next big thing in sacred chant, he's a rap artist with profound social awareness (check out his songs about Obama and Gandhi) and a penchant for Hip-Hop Hinduism (a la Ganesh, Hanuman, Rama, Krishna, and others).

Born Nicholas Giacomini in the Bay Area, California, MC is a musical navigator who takes his listeners to the Bronx by way of Bengal. Though his style is steeped in rap and the urban grooves of New York Hip-hop, his message comes from India's sages of old — his is the Vedic paradigm with a little bit of Big City rhyme.

Giacomini's incarnation as MC Yogi sets the world alight with his passion for truth. Not preachy truth, mind you. Just down home, simple, "the way it is." Irresistible and irrepressible logic. The divinities in his songs are neither vouched for nor denied. They are not presented as literal aspects of reality, nor as mere metaphors. In a sense, he presents them as both, and as neither. His point: learn what you can from them, because they are here to stay.

Some background: hip-hop music, also referred to as rap, is a musical genre that makes prodigious use of spoken word lyrics highlighted by deep, in-the-pocket grooves, with rhythms over backing beats. The style originated in the Bronx in the 1970s, predominantly among African-Americans and Latinos. Break-dancing, turntablism and graffitti are also parts of hip-hop culture. Rap usually incorporates portions of other songs, which is called "sampling," as well as synthesizers, drum machines, and, sometimes, live musicians.

MC Yogi uses all of these, along with Indian instruments and exotic chants, but especially noteworthy are Obama and Gandhi's sampled voices, overlaid like beautiful crystal on a fine chandelier. Still greater light comes through the agency of famous contemporary kirtan singers, Krishna Das and others who lend a helping hand, or, more precisely, a helping voice.

Rapping is also referred to as "MCing" or "emceeing," which is where MC Yogi gets the first part of his name. The second part comes from the fact that he and his wife own their own yoga school, the Yoga Toes Studio in Point Reyes Station, California. Yoga is also a big theme in his rap music. That is why he likes to call himself an "un-rapper." Whereas most rappers talk about contemporary life and love, and usually with a heavily materialistic message, MC is about something else. He's about yoga and spirituality, about positivity and change. Hence the name: MC Yogi.

He thus follows in the footsteps not only of predecessor rap artists, like Grandmaster Flash, Afrika Bambaataa, the Beastie Boys, Public Enemy, NWA, Run-DMC, Missy "Misdemeanor" Elliot, and Queen Latifah, but also of predecessor yogic poets, like Jayadeva, Tulsidas, Tukaram, and Mirabai. As these latter Indic saints wrote kavyas, champus, stotras, and stutis — various forms of devotional poetry — so, too, is MC contributing a modern-day facsimile.

His chosen art form, it must be admitted, partakes of poetic and musical devices that are centuries old, and he uses them much in the same way that the Sanskrit, Bengali, Braja-bhasha, and Marathi poets did. Rap incorporates alliteration, allusion, assonance, denotation, connotation, metaphor, repetition, rhythm, figurative language, free verse, hyperbole, imagery, irony, refrain, simile, and so on. MC is merely adapting these techniques to a relatively new musical form.

True, there have been numerous "Hindu" rappers already: BlaaZe, Ranidu Lankage, Yogi B, Natchatra, Princeten, Kadhalviruz, Krishan Maheson, Dr. Burn, and Suresh da Wun. But none have approached the genre quite in the way MC does. Bringing his listeners to hip-hop heaven, he raps the entire story of Hanuman, for example, with so much detail you would think he was a properly trained Brahmin, with years of Sanskrit learning. He presents legitimate Vedic knowledge with style and passion.

Moreover, he doesn't seem to subscribe to the idea of "Hinduism" as a sectarian religion. Rather, his well thought-out tunes show that the motifs and deities of "Hindu" philosophy are meant to represent non-sectarian, overarching truths, as real to Christianity as they are to Hinduism, as applicable to the life of an atheist as they are to those who are deeply religious. He uses "Hindu images" to convey everyday reality, which is how they were used in ancient India, and how, amongst the well-informed, they are used in India today.

Of course, traditional Hindus might see MC's methods as somewhat irreverent, or perhaps as respectfully irreverent. But this is missing the point. For example, when he refers to Ganesh as his "homie" or as having a face "only a mother could love," or when he sings of Hanuman's victories as comparable to those found in the movie Rocky, he is not being even slightly irreverent. Rather, he is

using the slang and jargon of hip-hop to tell a story, to bring Ganesh and Hanuman within the purview and understanding of his chosen audience. He is speaking the language of his people.

While it's true that hip-hop is a revolutionary culture that revels in rebellion, with little regard for tradition, MC Yogi is taking it in a different direction. He is using the forms and language of hip-hop to convey the universal love and overwhelming spirituality found in sanatana dharma. Though most people today identify this tradition with Hinduism, MC is taking it out of this preconceived valley of misinformation and placing it squarely where it belongs: in the blissful, rolling mountains of truth, and in the hearts of all sincere souls.

What follows is an interview that I conducted with MC in 2008.

Rosen: So let's begin with the beginning: Western name, year of birth, geographical setting, things of that nature.
MC: I was born Nicholas Giacomini in San Francisco, California, August 26, 1979. My mom was in labor on the Golden Gate Bridge. We almost didn't make it to the hospital. They thought she was going to give birth on the bridge.
Rosen: Maybe that's why your music is about bridge building and the harmony of religions. [laughter]
MC: [laughter] Maybe. Maybe not.

Rosen: Siblings?
MC: A brother and a sister, yes.

Rosen: Did you grow up with both music and religion?
MC. Yes, I grew up as a Catholic, first of all. Very religious. My grandmother taught Catechism. I'd consider her one of my first religious teachers. No doubt.

Rosen: Catholic school?
MC: Yep. Baptized, confirmed — the works. I've always been an innately religious person. But the Church got to be a bit much. There were always things in the Church that I didn't like…

Rosen: Some examples?
MC: The idea of eternal damnation — of a compassionate God sending flawed practitioners to Hell, forever. You know, that just never made sense to me. Or Christian exclusivity — that Jesus was the only way. What about all the people that came before Jesus? Or what about other sincere devotees in other religious traditions?

Rosen: So, it seemed to defy logic and to be unfair.
MC: Definitely. And so even though so much good comes out of religion, I could see another side, a down side, and that was discouraging. I knew at a young age that these things just didn't make sense.

Rosen: Right. That aspect of religion can be frustrating for thinking people. It's the external, fundamentalist aspect of religion, where people interpret the religion in the most superficial of ways. That's what leads to religious wars as such. But let's get into your musical influences. Where does that begin?
MC: I must have been about seven years old when I got my first two hip-hop albums: the Beastie Boys and Run-D.M.C., which revolutionized my consciousness. Before that, I was a quiet kid, into comic books, Star Wars action figures. But that hip-hop stuff opened me up. That's when I got into graffiti and break-dancing and stuff like that.

Rosen: What was it about those records?
MC: Well, this was the late '80s, when MTV was really popular and hip-hop was having a hard time breaking into the mainstream. These two records were produced by Rick Rubin, and the albums had wide appeal, on a number of levels. They were like crossover albums, with rock and hip-hop. So it was able to get me, and so many others like me, into hip-hop, to appreciate it as an art form.

Rosen: Every generation seems to have its share of transformative music — special albums that open people up to new forms of artistic expression. And there are pivotal albums that

undeniably have that affect on people. In my generation, there was stuff by Dylan, the Beatles, the Stones, Jimi Hendrix. All breakthrough material.
MC: Right. Although I wasn't around when it first came out, the Sgt. Pepper album seems to capture what I'm talking about. That must have been for your generation what these rap albums were for mine.

Rosen: Sgt. Pepper**. That was a big one, certainly. But that music often had an overtly spiritual message. How did you go from hip-hop to Eastern spirituality?**
MC: Oddly enough, the first time I heard the words namas te, which is a standard Indian greeting of respect, as you know, was on a Beastie Boys album called Check Your Head. Remember, I was into East Coast hip-hop, which is very different from West Coast hip-hop, and they often had Muslim MCs. This was a foreign, exotic faith, at least for me; so this turned me on to new ideas about religion and spirituality. That's how it started.

Also, I do have to say that Sgt. Pepper was a special record in my own spiritual journey, even though I got it long after the fact, many years after its initial release. My dad also got me Bob Marley's album Legend. Both of those records changed my life in a big way. Sgt. Pepper was the first time I heard Indian instruments, and that really struck a chord. It resonated deeply…

Rosen: And this led to an interest in Eastern mysticism and yoga practice?
MC: Well, when I was about 18, my dad got me into yoga, Ashtanga-yoga. He was doing it with some friends and it seemed like the logical next step for me. He was doing Mysore style, without a teacher. He and his friends knew the sequence and they practiced on their own. It was a vigorous method, without doubt. And his meditation practice flowed from the Siddha-yoga tradition, Gurumayi, and her approach to meditative techniques. So, initially that was the lineage I was introduced to.

Rosen: And how did the interest in yoga and hip-hop coalesce?
MC: Well, initially, when I got into yoga, I suppressed the hip-hop side. I let it drop for a while. I stopped listening to rap, and I got into a one-pointed pursuit of the spirit — excellent yoga practice was all I wanted. That was my focus. But gradually, all of the things I loved before getting into yoga started to seep back in, and that's natural, I think. You set them aside, for a while. But your natural interests and inclinations come out again in due course. They start to blend.

Rosen: That's a natural occurrence, yes, and quite common in the lives of spiritual practitioners with artistic interests. You assimilate. You make your spiritual path your own, and then you incorporate the things that are close to your heart. It's quite natural.
MC: So my love for rap and my love for yoga naturally came together.
Rosen: But I want to know how you learned the Vedic literature, and why you seem to have a certain expertise when it comes to Vedic deities. When you rap, you tell the stories so well! You are clearly not a Sanskrit scholar, and I don't think you've pored over the traditional literature…
MC: Well, I went to India and got into the comic books… [laughter]

Rosen: [laughter] You mean like Amar Chitra Katha**?**
MC: That's them. Of course, I'd get the basic ideas from there and then check back with the sacred texts, just to make sure that I was getting the stories right. Also, I guess I just really absorbed them along the way, hearing different parts of the stories from various teachers, in yoga classes, and so on. These myths — some people call them myths, which is a loaded word, I know — are just embedded in my consciousness. I think they go beyond the "Hindu" connotations and their surface associations. They speak to something fundamental and raw within each of us.

And there's the hip-hop beats, too, which are very hypnotic. They're like a drum loop. And when you get into that zone, they bring out all these inner feelings and thoughts and realizations. So whatever I had learned from the Indian comics, and teachers, and so on, it all becomes enhanced when I try to express it through hip-hop. When I rap, I go into a kind of trance, and I'll free-style, I'll start reciting spontaneous poetry. That's when it all comes out. So I write it down and then repeat it over and over, and then newer stuff comes out. That's how it works.

Rosen: And it sure does work. I'm so impressed with the CD. Joel Davis, the Label manager at White Swan Records, told me the story of your signing with the label. In his own words:

As co-owner (along w/his wife) of Yoga Toes Studio in Point Reyes Station, California, Nick (MC Yogi) has been a longtime customer of White Swan Music Distribution and knew Parmita Pushman, White Swan co-founder and president. He approached her in early '08 about his yoga hip-hop project and gave her an early demo copy of the track "Ganesh Is Fresh." She dug it and shared it with me. I flipped for it as well. We kept in touch with Nick, who continued feeding us tracks as the recording progressed… We weren't sure how the yoga community would respond to Elephant Power [MC's first CD] but felt that that quality of the music, and Nick's charm and energy in creating as well as promoting it, made this project worth the gamble, and with little hesitation, we jumped on board. The response so far has exceeded our early expectations, and we're all feeling great after the great vibes shared at the Jivamukti CD release party. That party also showed us that there's a lot of work ahead as we strive to garner MC Yogi the success he so richly deserves.

So that's how Joel sees your origins with the label, and he's obviously excited about your project. But I'm curious about another aspect of all this: how did you get the big kirtan **guys, like Krishna Das and Jai Uttal, on the record?**
MC: That's quite a story in itself. The short version: Jai lives close by, and we've been friends for a while. He's been like a mentor, providing a lot of guidance and instruction. I'm also friends with his wife, Nubia, who is also a yoga instructor in my area. So that just worked. It was natural. KD happened to be playing California, and I'm a huge fan, so I went to see him. Interestingly, he was staying in the apartment complex where I grew up, and I was visiting a friend of mine, who was living there. So we hooked up. I did some of my rap stuff for KD and he loved it. He was floored. It kind of worked like that for all of the celebrities or well-known musicians and artists that are on my CD. And I'm so grateful that they're there.

Rosen: Well, you're certainly unique. It's seems odd, in a sense, a white guy doing rap, though I know that many white guys are in fact rapping these days . . .
MC: Some people compare me to Eminem, since he's a white rapper. But I focus on yoga deities. That's the difference. In that sense, I'm an un-rapper! I'm the antithesis of the usual rapper. Like the first album focuses a bit on Ganesh, who has an elephant head. He's the lord of overcoming obstacles. I like to make this joke when people compare me to Eminem. Since I am rapping about a divine elephant, they can think of me like this: I'm M&M with peanuts.

The Yoga of Kirtan: An Interview with Steven J. Rosen[56]

Steven Rosen's book, The Yoga of Kirtan, offers interviews with 21 musicians, including Krishna Das, Jai Uttal, Deva Premal, Snatam Kaur, David Newman, and Ragani, all of whom are leading the kirtan revolution in the West. Kirtan is the call-and-response form of sacred chanting so popular in various spiritual cultures of the world. It is a form of yoga that allows one to rejoice and to have an open heart while enjoying spiritual practice.

The book focuses not only on kirtan but on the lives of those being interviewed in order to offer readers a peek into the world of kirtan through the personalities who embrace it on a regular basis. In this interview, the author discusses the book and the sonic spirituality that is the essence of kirtan.

Integral Yoga Magazine (IYM): What were some realizations, or perhaps common threads, that ran through your interviews for the book?
Steven Rosen (SR): One of the first realizations I had as I was interviewing these people was that conversation itself is a bit like kirtan, because it's call and response. I'd ask and they'd respond, and that would provoke me to ask more questions. The ecstasy of the conversation came from this back-and-forth dynamic. This is the same thing that happens in kirtan. And then, as each conversation came to a close, it was like the end of a kirtan, when you are basking in silent bliss. It was all spontaneous and joyful.

As I conducted the interviews with Snatam Kaur from the Sikh tradition, and Yofiyah, who recorded the CD, Kabbalah Kirtan, I realized that kirtan is truly universal. Calling out to God, glorification of God and the call-and-response format is present in every religious tradition and that was very inspiring to me. Recently, in fact, I went to hear Andrew Hahn, the "kirtan rabbi," at the Integral Yoga Institute in New York, and it was ecstatic. No matter what the tradition, kirtan is so user-friendly. According to the wisdom traditions and scriptures of India, the yogic practice most recommended in this modern age is kirtan. To see kirtan being used in the various religious traditions of the world seems to support that idea.

IYM: In your book, you talk about Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu as the father of kirtan**. Was there kirtan before his time?**
SR: Kirtan predates Sri Chaitanya. There is a particular quote from the Bhagavata Purana, an ancient text considered the cream of India's sacred scriptures: "My dear king, although Kali-yuga is full of faults, there is still one good quality about this age: simply by chanting the holy name of God, one can become free from material bondage and be promoted to the transcendental kingdom" (12.3.51). Though Sri Chaitanya infused the practice with new life, sages had long engaged in call-and-response glorification of God. The seeds of kirtan can be found in the Vedic literature, thousands of years old, and, as time went on, saints and sages from Bengal, Maharashtra, South India and elsewhere nurtured the flower of God's names with their own melodious styles and techniques, centuries before the advent of Sri Chaitanya. But he brought it out in the open and gave it to the world as a yogic science. I found that quite a number of kirtaniyas who have popularized kirtan come from the lineage of Sri Chaitanya. The obvious ones are from the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, which is part of the same Gaudiya Vaishnava lineage. Srila Prabhupada popularized kirtan and the chanting of the maha-mantra (Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare/ Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare) after coming to the United States in 1965.

In my book, I interviewed disciples of Srila Prabhupada, including Yamuna Devi, Dravida Das, and Vaiyasaki Das, among others. But I was surprised to find that Krishna Das and Jai Uttal were also influenced by this lineage. Though they are both disciples of Neem Karoli Baba, they told me that they initially developed the taste for chanting upon hearing the Gaudiya Vaishnavas chanting their mantras, Krishna Das in India and Jai while still in America. Jai Uttal said that when he was a kid in New York City, he'd follow the Hare Krishnas around. He'd stay a block or so behind because he didn't want to get involved, but he loved the sound, and so he'd follow them for hours. It was very profound for me to hear that many who are popularizing kirtan now have been influenced by the lineage of Sri Chaitanya. That's where the shakti, or power comes from.

IYM: How can we get the most out of kirtan**?**
SR: Anyone can chant, young or old, healthy or infirm, rich or poor, male or female. It's easy. In fact,

kirtan is the only yogic practice that even brings benefit to those not directly engaged in it! It benefits not just the people leading the chanting, not just the people responding in the chanting session, but also those who may just be passing by and who hear the chanting, without being conscious of it. So, in that sense, chanting can bring all types of benefits to many people. It brings inspiration, joy, healing and purification.

But let me say this: mantras come from certain lineages. A mantra can't just be manufactured. In fact, there is a scriptural injunction in the Padma Purana that states: Sampradaya-vihina ye mantras te nisphala matah. This means, "If your mantra does not come through the authorized lineage, it will not be effective." Nisphala means that it will not produce the ultimate fruit of love for God. Subsidiary fruits are easily attained, but the ultimate fruit only appears when the mantra is received from a master. There is a methodical process to properly receive mantras, and the highest quality kirtans derive from people who get their mantras in this way.

IYM: In the West, we don't tend to view kirtan **as a science.**

SR: Sri Chaitanya's immediate followers, the Six Goswamis of Vrindavana, explained chanting as a yogic science. Based on Sri Chaitanya's teachings, they brought out the inner meaning, that by chanting God's name, we are associating with God to the point of becoming intimate and of having a relationship with Him/Her. Sri Chaitanya brought this out experientially. And the Goswamis documented it so all of us could benefit from Sri Chaitanya's spontaneous love. On one hand, chanting is ecstasy and easy to perform, and on the other hand it is a science.

When we love someone, there is a feeling of love, but if we want to develop a deep and committed relationship with our beloved, there are certain steps we must take; there's a certain procedure. For love to blossom, we have to show our love for a given person, we have to nurture them and do other things that help them feel loved. There's a way to do this. We may love our husband or wife, but what do we do to help our partner feel loved? Though love is natural and from the heart, there's actually an art and science to how one develops and shows one's love. Psychologists and sociologists have long studied the art and heart of relationships. Just as there are signs and signals of a healthy and harmonious relationship, there are things that we can do to help or harm our relationships. That's the science of love.

What I'm trying to say is this: Sri Chaitanya was like the exemplar of kirtan. When he would chant, people would see he was in ecstasy and they'd say, "I want to be like him." The Six Goswamis documented the different stages of ecstasy and what his body went through. They wrote down the science of how to chant properly and experience the ecstasy. They documented what works and what doesn't work in building a relationship with the divine through kirtan, and this became the yoga of kirtan.

IYM: Many world scriptures speak about the power of the holy name.

SR: Yes, the world's major religious traditions concur in regard to the importance of God's name. For example, in the Bible, King David preached, "From the rising of the sun to its setting, the name of God is to be praised" (Psalms 113.3). Saint Paul said, "Everyone who calls upon the name of God will be saved" (Romans 10.13). Prophet Muhammad, in the Koran (87.2), counseled, "Glorify the name of your Lord, the most high." The Buddha declared, "All who sincerely call upon my name will come to me after death, and I will take them to paradise" (Vows of Amida Buddha , 18); and the Vaishnava scriptures repeatedly assert: "Chant the holy name, chant the holy name, chant the holy name of God. In this age of quarrel there is no other way, no other way, no other way to attain spiritual enlightenment" (Brihad-Naradiya Purana 3.8.126). This is all kirtan.

IYM: What were some of the highlights for you in the interviews you conducted?

SR: There were so many! Agni Dev's interview was the most exciting kirtan story I'd ever heard! He was from Trinidad and came to New York, and was doing kirtan in the winter. He got frostbite and hypothermia and, the way he describes the experience, well, someone should make a movie about it! Another that I found particularly amazing was Yamuna Devi's story about the first Hare Krishna mantra recording that George Harrison arranged with Apple Records. Then there was Karnamrita's story about how she had grown up in an ashram, left everything, had nothing to do with it and then went to Vrindavana, studied singing, and then got back into kirtan on her own terms.

There are so many great stories embedded in these interviews. I wanted to put together a readable book that allows readers entrance into the history, emotion and culture of sacred chant through the stories of those who have popularized kirtan. I think, through their stories, the reader comes to

understand that kirtan is not really about context, culture or language. It's about a pure heart calling out to the divine. What we are talking about here is sonic spirituality, which is at the heart and soul of all wisdom traditions.

Part VI: Science

Soulful Science

"Science and the Soul," an October 23, 2006 U.S. News and World Report cover story, caught my eye. It documents a new trend in which a contingent of scientists is reconsidering long-standing assumptions about the mind, consciousness, and, yes, even the soul. "There is something troubling, if not downright offensive," writes author Jay Tolson, "about the effort to reduce human consciousness to the operations of a three-pound chunk of wrinkled brain tissue." His point is clear: there's more to human existence than the world we see around us. And an increasing number of scientists of various disciplines are now agreeing with him. "Not only has advanced neuroscientific research revealed an obdurate mystery at the core of consciousness," he muses, "but theoretical advances in the natural and physical sciences have greatly complicated the effort to reduce all human phenomena — the mind notably included — to the effects of material causes."

This is a far cry from the claims of scientists like Francis Crick, among others, who, slightly more than a decade ago, wrote in his acclaimed book, The Astonishing Hypothesis, "The Astonishing Hypothesis is that 'You,' your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules."[57]

Crick really believes that hypothesis.

Scientists have traditionally held one of two positions on the soul. The first argues that souls clearly exist, but science cannot prove or disprove this fact, because the soul is spiritual and science uses tools made of matter. According to the other well-worn perspective, souls do not exist, and it would be a waste of time for science to try to prove that they do.

Besides these two views, some say that there has long been objective evidence for the existence of souls, but the scientific establishment fails to accept the evidence because it contradicts conventional materialistic thinking. It is also true that some scientists would like to believe in the existence of the soul, but they fear being rejected by their more closed-minded co-workers.

Could science ever really determine whether or not the soul exists? It seems unlikely. Still, Srila Prabhupåda believed that making the attempt is a step in the right direction.

As early as the mid-1970s, the Montreal Gazette ran an article by world-famous cardiologist Wilfred G. Bigelow, urging systematic research to determine what the soul is and where it comes from. Srila Prabhupada responded to Dr. Bigelow as follows:

> The undertaking of "soul research" would certainly mark the advancement of science. But no matter how much science advances, they will not be able to find the soul. The soul's presence can simply be accepted on circumstantial understanding, for you will find in the Vedic literature that the dimension of the soul is one ten-thousandth the size of a point. Therefore, it is not possible for the material scientists to capture the soul. You can simply accept the soul's existence by taking it from higher authorities. What the greatest scientists are now finding to be true, we've explained long ago.[58]

What would be the advantage of such research? Prabhupada answers:

> As soon as one understands the existence of the soul, he can immediately understand the existence of God. The difference between God and the soul is that God is a very great soul, and the living entity is a very small soul; but qualitatively they are equal. God is all-pervading, and the living entity is localized. But the nature and quality are the same.

In the Bhagavad Gita, Lord Sri Krishna explains the eternal nature of the soul. He specifically says that there was never a time when He did not exist, and He says this is true of all living beings, including you and me. He further informs us that we will not cease to be in the future. This obviously refers to the soul, for the body will surely perish. The embodied soul, Krishna informs us, continually passes from boyhood to youth to old age, which are like several different bodies in this one lifetime. In the same way, the soul enters another body at the time of death.

Krishna says, "That which pervades the entire body you should know to be indestructible. No one is able to destroy that imperishable soul… For the soul there is neither birth nor death at any time. He has not come into being, does not come into being, and will not come into being. He is unborn, eternal, ever-existing, and primeval. He is not slain when the body is slain… As a person puts on new garments, giving up old ones, the soul similarly accepts new material bodies, giving up the old and useless ones." (Bhagavad Gita 2.17, 2.20, 2.22)

So, the body dwindles and dies but the soul does not: our actual self simply changes forms, giving

up prior bodies as snakes shed their skin.

Soul Realization

Of course, realizing this truth takes more than scientific know-how. It takes spiritual practice: if you want to realize that you are a soul, you have to act like a soul. The natural state of the soul is to be eternally glorifying God. By engaging in such glorification under the guidance of a bona fide spiritual master who has realized his spiritual identity, the soul gradually removes the covering of illusion and becomes “reacquainted” with the actual self, the person beyond the body. This is the science of the soul.

But conventional science knows nothing of these matters. In fact, the scientific community is often antagonistic to spiritual views, and “the new atheism” — a movement that arrogantly calls itself “the Brights” (as opposed to those dimwitted theists) — is becoming more prominent as the years wear on. Recent best-selling books, such as Richard Dawkins’s The God Delusion and Christopher Hitchens’s God is Not Great, are taking the literary world by storm. Atheism sells books.

Still, a parallel universe of scientists and scholars who support a theistic worldview accompanies the literature of disbelief. For every Dawkins or Hitchens, there is a Patrick Glynn (God: The Evidence), affiliated with Harvard, or a Peter Forest (God Without the Supernatural: A Defense of Scientific Theism), from Cornell. While the Brights seem to think they can disprove all religious contentions with science and reason, these latter authors stand up to them every bit of the way and offer convincing counter-evidence.

The recent spate of books and conferences, as highlighted in that issue of U.S. News and World Report, shows hope. Indeed, in recent years, the scientific community has taken bold steps toward understanding the person as a whole, not just as the material body. To cite yet another prominent example, Andrew Newberg, a Professor of Nuclear Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania, directs his university’s recently founded Center for Spirituality and the Mind, an interdisciplinary program exploring “neuro-theology,” lauded by scientists around the world. His work tells us that if religion can learn something valuable about the body and mind from science, then science should be able to re-learn something from religion about the deepest levels of who we really are. That’s something Srila Prabhupada would deeply appreciate, and something that benefits us all.

Quantum Brahman**: The Missing Force of the Universe**

According to some, modern science recognizes an all-pervasive energy at the core of existence; a force, if you will, and it divides this force into four distinct categories: (1) first, there is the kind that is "gravitational," which is considered the weakest of the four. It is known for its ability to "attract" objects that are nearby and also those that are far away. The next kind (2) is of an "electromagnetic" nature. This is more powerful than gravitational force, operating, as it does, within the realm of atoms and molecules. After this, there is what is known as (3) "weak nuclear force." This is where radioactivity originates, and is a step divorced from the fourth form of energy: (4) "strong nuclear force," which has short range, but which is extremely powerful.

Together, these forces inform the theoretical dynamics of the material universe. However, they do not account for the subtle nuances of life itself — they do not account for consciousness — and so scientists, especially those with a spiritual bent, still search for a unifying force, a fifth force, something that speaks to the larger issues underlying the mysteries of the mind and heart. Such scientists admit that the four forces of material energy, while interesting, cannot be identified with ultimate truths or the underlying features of what really makes us tick as people, or as spirits in a machine made of material nature.

The late Dr. O. B. L. Kapoor, who was both a scientist and a religious scholar, traces the missing force of science to the principle of Shaktiman, i.e., claiming that all energy (shakti) must have an energetic source:

> The physicist, trying to discover the real nature of matter, found that the smallest piece of matter, smaller than even the point of a pin, was composed of millions of electrons. He tried to study the nature of electrons and found that they were "disembodied charges of electricity," that is, electricity existing apart from matter. But though they were disembodied charges of electricity, they seemed to behave sometimes like a particle and sometimes like a wave. Eddington, therefore, suggested that they should be called "wavicles" to indicate their dual character, but their real nature remained unknown. If they were not any thing charged with electricity, but electricity itself, the question remained, what ultimately is electricity? The reply was that it is energy or shakti. Energy, it was further explained, was a process. But energy or shakti always pertains to the Shaktiman or possessor of energy, and a process is always the process of some thing moving or acting or doing something. What is that which possesses the energy? What is that thing of which the energy is a process? The physicist has not been able to answer these questions. And he will never be able to answer them, for he has reduced everything to energy, and nothing else remains to which he may point in answer to these questions. The real nature of matter thus remains unknown to him. He cannot say anything about it except that it is "he knows not what." Eddington says, "Something unknown is doing we do not know what — that is what our theory amounts to."[59]

If Kapoor had his way, the fifth force of the universe might be called Quantum Brahman,[60] which merges the concepts of physics with their underlying spiritual basis. From the Gaudiya Vaishnava point of view, Brahman is the eternal, metaphysical foundation of the world we see around us. As such, it is a religious counterpart to what science would call the fundamental storehouse of variegated energies. The energies themselves are called shakti. The phenomena of energy and its enigmatic source is well known. Scientists such as Einstein, Eddington, James Jeans, and J. B. S. Haldane have already recognized this.[61] So Kapoor does not stand alone. John Boslough, in his best-selling book, Stephen Hawking's Universe, brings to light the fact that such things were known in India for millennia:

> Recently, some physicists have come to see a relationship between their work and the ideas behind Eastern mysticism. They believe that the paradoxes, odds, and probabilities as well as the observer-dependence of Quantum Mechanics have been anticipated in the writings of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism.[62]

This energy, again, is known as shakti, which, in the material world, expresses itself through three qualities, called gunas: Tamas (ignorance), Sattva (goodness), and Rajas (passion). The word guna means "rope," implying that the various permutations of these three bind us to the world of matter. They tie us to conditional responses and further implicate us in material life. Briefly, the mode of ignorance consists of foolishness, madness, illusion, inertia, indolence, and sleep; the mode of goodness is characterized by relative purity, illumination, happiness, and freedom from sinful reactions; the mode of passion involves uncontrollable desire and longing, over-endeavor, greed, and

attachment to the fruits of one's labor. The Bhagavad Gita explains these modes at some length, showing how they condition and bind the soul according to her individual tastes and needs. Each soul is unique, and so the modes are applied in different ways for each individual.

"The function of Tamas [the heavy, cold, or opaque principle of inertia] is to veil consciousness," says Sir John Woodroffe, in an insightful lecture about shakti and its various manifestations, "of Sattva [the light, warm, or transparent principle of intelligibility] to reveal it."[63] Rajas, the active, balancing principle — the thermostat, so to speak — determines how the other two will interact. These three states, which the person who is pure can perceive in his own inner being, are understood in many traditions: they are viewed as the destructive, creative, and the sustaining factors of the world; or the negative, positive, and reconciling forces whose dialectical action govern cause and effect. Every particular form in the world we see around us is subject to, and is the consequence of, the interaction of these three forms of energy.[64]

Vaishnava thought allows for Brahman, the metaphysical ground of all being, which is impersonal, and it also allows for Para-Brahman, or, as Kapoor called it, Shaktiman, the personal, energetic source of all shakti (energy).

Brahman, Paramatma, **and** Shaktiman

Gaudiya Vaishnava theology recognizes three aspects of God: Brahman, Paramatma (Supersoul), and Bhagavan (Shaktiman) — or, more descriptively, the Lord's impersonal feature, His all-pervading localized aspect, and His supreme personhood. The three primary attributes of God — sat (being, or eternality), chit (full cognition), and ananda (unending bliss) — correspond to these three aspects. Bhagavan realization represents the sum total of all God's qualities. Thus Krishna, Bhagavan Himself, has a distinct place in this stratification of divinity.

Brahman realization (an understanding of God as an impersonal, mystical force) is a fundamental view of God, as we have already mentioned. This path is appealing to empiricists who are inclined to spirituality in general. By a process called jnana-yoga, a traditional discipline that focuses on the development of the intellect, one can achieve full Brahman realization, or awareness of eternality (sat) in relation to God. Most current forms of yoga and religiosity bring adherents to this basic spiritual perception, at best. Persons who follow this path are known as jnana-yogis. Their quest for truth brings them to the Lord's personal effulgence, called the Brahmajyoti, into which they may merge after death. There is a tendency, however, to fail in this pursuit, because the vast impersonalism of eternality impels one to long for natural, interpersonal relationships. And so the practitioner may be born again to continue on the spiritual path.

After lifetimes of frustration, trying to achieve God realization through Brahman, a jnana-yogi may raise himself to the next level and thus become an ashtanga-yogi, practicing the eightfold path of yoga as outlined in Patanjali's Yoga Sutras. If such a yogi is successful, he may realize the localized form of God, who, again, is in every heart as well as within every atom. This manifestation of the Lord is called Paramatma, or Supersoul. Krishna elaborates on the Supersoul's nature in the Bhagavad Gita: "He is the source of light in all luminous objects. He is beyond the darkness of matter and is unmanifested. He is knowledge, He is the object of knowledge, and He is the goal of knowledge…" (13.18) Krishna says that the indwelling Lord is the source of the three modes of nature — goodness, passion, and ignorance — and is thus not affected by them. This Supersoul, says Krishna, is beyond the scope of the material senses. (13.13-17). He must be perceived by other means — by spiritual intuition. Upon realizing Him, one achieves awareness of more than immortality: one attains the essence of spiritual knowledge (chit) as well.

Vaishnava teachers have attempted to clarify the position of Paramatma, the Supersoul, in the following way: as the Sun may appear reflected in countless jewels, so the Lord within every atom may appear like many, though He is one, existing (in His original form) in the spiritual world.

An inherent danger in pursuing the path of Paramatma is misidentification of one's individual soul with the Supersoul, or the Lord in the heart. The Vedic literature seeks to help practitioners avoid this danger by offering the following analogy. The Supersoul and the individual soul are like two green birds sitting in the same green tree. Because they are all of one color, they may seem to merge, and it could become difficult to distinguish one from the other. But such a mistake would constitute dismal failure on the path of Paramatma realization. All three — the Supersoul, the individual soul, and the tree — are quite different.

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To extend the analogy, Vaishnava sages often say that the individual soul is enjoying the fruits of the tree, while the Supersoul stands by and watches, waiting for His companion to give up the pursuit of temporary pleasures. This, of course, may take many lifetimes. But when the living being finally turns to the Supersoul in love and devotion, the Supersoul agrees to direct him and purify him. At that time, He guides the living being from within, bringing him into the association of a pure devotee, one who is accomplished in Shaktiman realization. When this occurs, one moves to the final stage of God consciousness.

Shaktiman realization centers around developing a relationship with Bhagavan, the Sanskrit equivalent of "God." The word bhagavan literally means "He who possesses all opulences in their most complete form." The sages of the East have identified six primary opulences: strength, beauty, wealth, fame, knowledge, and renunciation. Only the Supreme Personality of Godhead possesses all these qualities in full. One who becomes adept at worshipping Him becomes aware of eternity and knowledge, as in Brahman and Paramatma realization, and develops a profound sense of transcendental bliss (ananda) as well. The person on the path of Shaktiman realization attains intimacy with God, becoming absorbed in His personhood in a deep and meaningful way. Thus, Vaishnavism teaches that realization of Bhagavan is the perfection of jnana-yoga and ashtanga-yoga, and, indeed, of all spiritual pursuits.

To make the three levels of God realization more understandable, later Vaishnava commentators have supplied the following apt analogy. Three simple villagers and their guide are at a railway station, waiting in great anticipation for the train to arrive, for they have never seen one. Observing the headlight on the front of the train, which is pulling in at a distance, one villager asks what the light in the distance represents. The guide responds: "That is the train." Confident that he has seen the train, the first villager leaves satisfied.

When the train approaches the platform, one of the remaining two villagers exclaims, "Oh! This is the train!" He has seen the series of cars pulling into the station — the form behind the headlights. He is now also confident that he has seen all there is to see, and he leaves.

The third man patiently remains behind. And when the train comes into the station, he has the opportunity to meet the conductor and see the various passengers on board.

The three villagers then went back to their small village and began to tell everyone what they had seen. Though it was an undeniable truth that each had seen the same train, their descriptions were diverse; their realizations were different. The third villager obviously had a more complete experience than the other two. He was able to convince the others of this, for he perfectly described what his two comrades had seen, and more.

Analogically, the big light represents the effulgent impersonal aspect of the Lord (Brahman). This light with something more concrete behind it conveys the idea of divine substance, a personality that pervades all existence (Paramatma). And the third villager's vision represents the most complete aspect of God realization (Bhagavan), wherein one meets the Supreme Personality of Godhead, Lord Sri Krishna (Shaktiman), and develops a relationship with Him.

Conclusion

In the Vaishnava view, all three of the above are considered different aspects of the same Absolute Truth, and they all are valid. One views these different aspects of God according to one's level of spiritual advancement. Vaishnava teachers recommend meditation on the fullest truth: Bhagavan realization. The other processes were developed for gradual elevation to this point. Under the direction of a spiritually accomplished Vaishnava, however, one can immediately pursue the path of Bhagavan realization, surpassing the levels of Brahman and Paramatma.[65]

The "fifth force of the universe," underlying all the rest, can easily be identified with Brahman, as already mentioned, but it can also be seen as Paramatma and Bhagavan, too, for, as alternate aspects of Brahman, they interpenetrate all that is. Paramatma, for example, is traditionally referred to as "the source of light" and "the object of knowledge." It is a localized form of God (Bhagavan), existing in and between every atom. This naturally brings us back to the forces of material existence.

The Bhagavata Purana explains the Paramatma in the following way:

> The Lord, as Supersoul, pervades all things, just as fire permeates wood, and so He appears to be of many varieties, though He is the absolute one without a second. (SB 1.2.32)

A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada comments on this text:

> …the Supreme Personality of Godhead, by one of His plenary parts expands Himself all over the material world, and His existence can be perceived even within the atomic energy. Matter, anti-matter, proton, neutron, etc., are all different effects of the Paramatma feature of the Lord. As from wood, fire can be manifested, or as butter can be churned out of milk, so also the presence of the Lord as Paramatma can be felt by the process of legitimate hearing and chanting of the transcendental subjects which are especially treated in the Vedic literatures like the Upanishads and Vedanta.

Thus, Quantum Brahman, the ultimate Force of the universe, can be accessed through hearing and chanting the holy name of the Lord.

Lord Matsya and Superstring Theory: A Fishy Story with No Strings Attached

Several ancient civilizations claim that a great flood took place in the distant past. They further claim that a divine being sent this flood to destroy humankind as an act of divine retribution, usually because man was considered a failed experiment and God thus wanted to start over. Such a scenario most famously unfolds in the story of Noah's ark and in the Epic of Gilgamesh, among others places, but it also exists, with some differences, in the Matsya Avatara story as found in the Vaishnava-Hindu tradition. In that tradition, in fact, it is found that God wants to start over repeatedly, as the great ages recur again and again, sometimes with floods ending one age before another one begins.

Most people think of the flood as a myth, and it would be difficult to rationally disagree with them. World Cultures Digest, a prominent academic journal, does disagree, though, and mainly because of the fact indicated above: several world cultures, separated by time, space, and worldview, all vouch for the fact that it happened. This unanimity of perspective, claims the journal, would be highly unlikely if the story did not have some basis in reality. The Puranic version, for its part, is clearly presented in the tradition as a true story.

The first incarnation of Vishnu, in terms of historical sequence, took the form of a fish, Matsya by name. (Matsya means "fish," and this incarnation is referred to as Matsya or Matsya Avatara.) In Moby Dick, Herman Melville refers to what he sees as the Hindu myth of the whale incarnation of Vishnu. But for devotees and yogis worldwide, both Vishnu and Matsya are, of course, real.

The Story of Matsya

Matsya's story flows as follows. In the earliest world age, Satya-yuga, a King named Manu was performing severe penance for thousands of years, as kings of the time were wont to do. One day, while he was performing ablutions with river water, a small fish appeared in his hands. Just as he was about to throw the little creature back into the river, it asked the King to save its life. Heeding its request, the King put the fish into a jar of water. But the fish grew so big that no jar could contain it. He then threw it into the lake, but it soon outgrew that, forcing the King to throw it first into the Ganges and then, as the fish kept growing, into the ocean. The King realized that it was Lord Vishnu himself, who then made His divine identity clear.

Matsya told the King that the world would end in seven days, compliments of a huge flood. He asked the King to build a large boat and to take onboard seven prominent sages, the seeds of all plants, and one animal of each type. He came as a fish, He said, to propel the boat to Mount Himavan, where the survivors would begin the next yuga (age). True to his word, the Lord appeared after seven days. The king tied the boat to Him by using the royal serpent Vasuki. Lord Matsya took all of them to Mount Himavan and kept them there until the flood was over. After that, a new era dawned, and the king began to procreate as Lord Matsya had instructed him.

Polydimensional Realities

What does all of this have to do with Superstring Theory? Recently, I happened to read The Fabric of the Cosmos, Brian Greene's best-selling book on the subject. While reading it — a book, mind you, that ostensibly has nothing to do with Vaishnava spirituality — I was surprised that I could not help thinking of the spiritual masters of the Vaishnava tradition. The works of Krishna conscious teachers read like manuals on Superstring Theory in that they seem to anticipate the discovery of alternate universes and polydimensional realities.

Superstring Theory, or simply String Theory, suggests that there are as many as ten spatial dimensions, not just the four of conventional discourse, the three dimensions of space and the fourth dimension of time. It might be argued that we can accept the reality of Matsya — or other supernatural descriptions from the Vedic literature, such as Vishnu with four arms or God as a blue cowherd boy — with the aid of these extra dimensions, for, without them, one would be hard-pressed to explain such things.

Vishnu and the spiritual realm, of course, need no such explanation, for, as Krishna conscious masters repeatedly point out, the world beyond time does not have to conform to physical laws. When

this higher reality breaks into the world as we know it, however, as in the story of Brahma and the creation of the universe, or of a fish growing to astronomical proportions, a reasonable explanation is certainly in order. Superstring Theory might provide such an explanation.

The theory was popularized in the 1980s, when Michael Green at Queen Mary College and John Schwarz at the California Institute of Technology demonstrated that it just might be the unifying theory that reconciles quantum mechanics and general relativity. Its original proponents did not see it as supporting spiritual reality. With extrapolation, however, their explanations lead in only one direction: there are alternate levels of reality, things we cannot see, and dimensions of existence to which we are not privy.

A Step in the Right Direction

Before Superstring ever came into existence, J. Stillson Judah, Professor Emeritus of the Graduate Theological Union at Berkeley and longtime scholar of the Vaishnava tradition, recognized the need to expand our perception of reality, and he often wrote about it. The article in World Cultures Digest cites him:

> If to the outsider "the pastimes of Krishna" appear miraculous and illogical, the following question must be asked. Does not the awareness of a higher reality, which all religions declare to be a divine mystery, come most often through participation in the irrational, the paradox and, for the disbeliever, absurd? For many Buddhists, it may emerge through meditating on the paradoxes of the prajna-paramita or the nonsensical koans; for the Pentecostals it speaks through the incoherent babble of glossolalia; for the Roman Catholics it involves the mystery of the transubstantiation of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ during the Mass; for the Muslim, it may occur during the pilgrimage to Mecca, when he trots between the hills of Safa and Marwah imitating Hagar's search for water.

In other words, religion is precisely concerned with higher realities and spiritual, not material, phenomena. Stories associated with the spirit will naturally focus on otherworldly or supernatural events, and this should be expected. It is only when viewed from a materialistic vantage point that such stories appear strange. In fact, Superstring Theory, a product of science, which is generally materialistic, unmasks a truth that could accommodate stories such as that of Lord Matsya. A devotee accepts these truths with no strings attached. But for those who need evidence, Superstring Theory might be a step in the right direction, and Judah would be a firm supporter of that move.

The Bad Brains Behind Mad Cow Disease

The writing is on the wall. As of January 2, 2004, it became clear that meat-eating is risky business. An MSNBC report — picked up by the Associated Press, thus finding its way into newspapers and magazines around the world — let us know in glaring terms that mad cow disease is here to stay and that meat is dangerous. Plain and simple. The same message came through in a recent Time magazine article (January 12, 2004). The title: "How Now, Mad Cow?" The lead-in: "Big beef was doing fine until disease felled a heifer. Will consumer anxiety cripple the industry?" That week's issue of Newsweek ran a similar article, entitled, "Mad Cow: What's Safe Now?" The lead-in for that article: "They hoped it wouldn't happen here, then it did. Now U.S. officials are rewriting rules and assuring consumers that beef won't make them sick."

Mad Cow Disease — which is technically known as Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy — first surfaced in England in the 1980s, which led to a number of people abandoning the consumption of flesh-foods. Some years later, former cattle rancher Howard Lyman appeared on The Oprah Winfrey Show, and he explained in no uncertain terms how the disease could eventually spread across the entire world. In his book Mad Cowboy (1998), he specifically wrote that Mad Cow would probably make its way to the States, which it did in 2003. All of this led Lyman to become a vegetarian while strongly suggesting that others head in that direction, too. He made it clear, for Oprah and others, that "food animals" are not even treated like living beings but rather like machines, and that the conditions on factory farms are horrible, to say the least. The practice of mixing rotting animal parts into animal feed, which is part of their horrendous treatment, in fact, is what causes Mad Cow Disease. Thus, Lyman recommended a return to a more simple way of life. In the end, he would applaud Srila Prabhupada's proposals for a simplified, holistic way of life in which both humans and the animals that serve them live naturally and peacefully, and in good health.

With the recent outbreak in America, mad cow disease hits close to home for me. I've been a vegetarian for more than thirty years, but after the discovery of an infected cow in Washington state, I started to get calls from old friends and family members: "Maybe I shouldn't be eating meat." "You were right all along."

If I've been "right all along," it is because I see the value of ahimsa, harmlessness, and of avoiding unnecessary killing in any form. I also met the devotees of Krishna early on, who were also "right all along" because they heeded the words of Lord Krishna, who, as God, naturally has the inside scoop on what's real and what's not. Devotees of Krishna follow His instructions, and the Krishna tradition has supported vegetarianism from the time of the Bhagavad Gita onwards, without looking back. The tradition has stood behind the principle of vegetarianism and animal rights since as far back as the Mahabharata, and textual evidence for its value can be found in the Manu-samhita and in numerous other texts. These sacred writings say that man's proper diet consists of fruits, nuts, grains, dairy, and vegetables, offered to God with love and devotion. Eating food offered to Krishna is called taking prasadam ("mercy"). Since Krishna Himself does not recommend that we eat meat, reason the devotees, then something must be wrong with it, at least for human beings.

Prominent authorities on health and nutrition also say we should lay off. The American Dietetic Association officially recommends vegetarianism, and medical practitioners in the public eye such as Dean Ornish and John Robbins highly recommend the meatless way of life. So maybe we shouldn't be eating the flesh of animals. The flesh of animals. That's exactly what it really is — no matter how you dress it up, package it, or serve it. Don't delude yourself into thinking it's anything other than what it is, because that would just be a lot of bull.

The Vaishnava Alternative

The People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) have a sensible solution: "Since spongy brains have been found in cats, dogs, sheep, mink, deer, and elk, as well as in cows and people, you may not be protecting yourself by avoiding beef alone. When there are so many delicious vegetarian alternatives available at virtually every restaurant and grocery store, why gamble?" In other words, vegetarianism is a no-brainer.

But vegetarianism doesn't get to the root of the problem. It simply gives us a method for avoiding the disease ourselves. If we analyze the cause of mad cow disease, we see farmers and businessmen looking for shortcuts — feeding all kinds of inedible waste, including diseased brains, to their

helpless livestock. In short, creating monsters. Unless we address the underlying mentality — the diseased brains behind the diseased brains — similar problems will continue to arise. What is called for, then, is a change in consciousness, as well as diet.

The Vaishnava scriptures state clearly that the preferred diet for man includes only vegetarian foods — in endless delectable combinations, both raw and cooked — and that, before eating, these edibles should be offered to Krishna with love and devotion, as mentioned above. By association with God through this process, the food becomes purifying, gradually changing the consciousness of those who cook it, eat it, and serve it. Thus, prasadam addresses both concerns: diet and consciousness.

Moreover, devotees of Krishna feel for the suffering of others. We do not abstain from eating animal flesh just to avoid a terrible disease. We want to live peacefully with all of God's creatures, and not merely because it serves our purposes. By taking prasadam, we move a long way from mad cow, and into the realm of happy cow.

The Kuru Disease

Coincidentally, one member of the spongiform encephalopathy family of diseases is known as kuru. In the Mahabharata, the Pandavas are the heroes, the protectors of the righteous, and their cousins, the Kurus, are their evil adversaries. The Pandavas defeat their pernicious cousins not merely by their own strength, but by siding with Krishna. Similarly, the evil disease kuru can be defeated, not merely by vegetarianism, but by a change of consciousness.

Symbolically, this truth can be detected in the word vegetarianism itself, a word that in common parlance has come to mean "eater of vegetables." Originally, however, it comes from the Latin vegetus, meaning "whole, sound, fresh, and lively." Similarly, the Pandavas had to see beyond ordinary piety and righteousness and beyond ordinary definitions of duty. They had to adopt a more holistic conception of life, wherein the dualities of good and evil fall away like so many diseased animals. They surrendered to Krishna, the Supreme Personality of Godhead, and in so doing conquered the dreaded Kurus once and for all.

Part VII: The Transcendent Unity of Religions

Harmonic Conversion: A Note on the Nature of True Religion and the Importance of Non-Sectarianism

In a public lecture in 1972, Srila Prabhupada sensibly defined the true nature of religion:

> In human society there is always some kind of religious institution. This is called dharma, faith. As already explained, dharma is one's constitutional and functional duty. The essence of real religion is the rendering of service to God. We have, however, manufactured many different religions in society according to the countries and circumstances… [O]ne can execute any type of religious principle, but the results should be the achieving of perfection. One may say that he is perfectly executing the principles of his religion as found in the Bible, Koran, etc., and that is all very good, but what is the result? The result should be that one should increase his desire or tendency to hear about God.[66]

In Prabhupada's teaching, this spiritual essence is called sanatana dharma, or the "eternal function of the soul." This ancient tradition prompts its adherents to get at the heart of the religious pursuit: love for God. It emphasizes the quality of one's devotion, not the label of one's particular path. As Prabhupada once said in a room conversation in Geneva in June 1974:

> First of all, what is the quality? The quality of the Christian is seen by whether or not he obeys the Ten Commandments. If he does not obey, then where is his Christianity? That is stated, guna-karma: by quality and work one becomes a Christian or Hindu or Muslim. There must be the quality. And when true spirituality develops, either from Christianity or Hindu or Muslim — it does not matter — then there is the desired quality… So, our movement exists to create lovers of God, and that is stated in the Bhagavatam: that is first-class religion which turns the followers to become lovers of God.

According to Prabhupada, the supreme path is that by which one develops love for God. If one does not develop this requisite love, then the entire religious enterprise is nothing more than a distraction from the ultimate goal of life. Prabhupada bases this idea on the Srimad Bhagavatam (1.2.6): "The supreme duty (dharma) for all humanity is that by which people can attain to loving devotional service unto the transcendent Lord. Such devotional service must be unmotivated and uninterrupted to completely satisfy the Self."

In other words, there is what might be called external dharma (duty, religiosity) and internal dharma, and if the former does not lead to the latter, the former is to be discarded. This is understood by a careful study of the Bhagavad Gita: Krishna initially instructs mankind to embrace dharma fully. He states that it is for the specific purpose of establishing dharma that He Himself descends (BG 4.8). But this refers to external dharma. As the Gita draws to a close, Krishna finally advises that we relinquish external dharma and take shelter of Him. (BG 18.66) This is internal dharma. And this is preferable. In other words, while calculating how to practice one's religion it is all too easy to leave God out of the equation. Therefore, Lord Krishna ultimately says that, while following religious traditions is important, it is more important to get at the essence of religion.

What, Ultimately, is Dharma?

All forms of Vaishnavism, including the Hare Krishna movement, respect and practice dharma as enunciated in ancient Vedic texts, but it emphasizes the essence of dharma: love of God. Ultimately, this is what all religion teaches: to adhere to external dharma but to see it in perspective, as subservient to internal dharma. This perception must be achieved to understand the true meaning of the religious quest.

In Sanskrit, the word most often used for religion is, again, dharma. But dharma denotes more than just a particular sect one joins to express some religious faith. Among its many definitions, dharma literally means "a thing's essence." The dharma of sugar is sweetness; the dharma of fire is heat; the dharma of the living being is to know and love God. In other words, dharma is that from which one cannot be separated. You can change your faith, your mode of religious expression; a Jew can become a Muslim, who can become a Christian, who can become a Hindu. But a servant of God you remain. This is your true dharma.

One might protest: "I'm not a servant of God. I'm my own person. I don't serve anyone." If we examine our lives closely, however, we will see clearly that we are always servants. We may serve God or, by extension, humanity. We may serve our own family, or our very own senses. But serve we

must. In the conditioned state of material existence, living entities serve the Lord indirectly and unfavorably, whereas in the unconditioned state of spiritual existence, living entities serve the Lord directly and favorably.

To give an example, everyone in the State serves the State. Some serve directly and favorably as policemen, soldiers, politicians, taxpayers, and so on, while others serve indirectly and unfavorably as prisoners. Trapped within the prison of material nature under the supervision of Durgadevi (the personification of material energy), the conditioned souls are forced to serve maya, or illusion, and in return for their service they are sometimes kicked by the cruel laws of nature and sometimes soothed by her ever-changing touch. But the liberated souls living in the supreme abode of the Lord (that is, the kingdom of God, our original home) serve the Lord directly in any number of spiritual rasas, or transcendent relationships, and they enjoy a life of eternity, knowledge, and bliss in the association of the Supreme Personality of Godhead, the reservoir of all pleasure.

The Importance of Non-Sectarianism

Since God is one, religion must also be one. This one common religion, referred to by various names, is known to most people of India (and to the Hare Krishna devotees) as sanatana dharma, and this is what they attempt to practice. Thus, sanatana dharma, the religion of the Hare Krishna movement, is not a sectarian concept that artificially tries to decry other religions and establish its supremacy on the basis of mundane conceptions of superiority and inferiority; it is the natural urge of the spirit soul to love and serve God. It is the essential nature — the internal dharma — of every living entity.

Vaishnavism teaches that living beings are not Christians, Jews, Hindus, Muslims, or what have you, for these are all bodily designations. And this should be evident from my conversation with my uncle. A person is not his or her body but is, rather, a spiritual soul. Nonetheless, many think that they are Christian, for example, just because they were born into a Christian family. They obviously do not consider that in their next life — or later in this life, for that matter — they may be a Buddhist, a Sikh, or something else. Again, a Christian may convert to become a Jew, or a Hindu may become a Muslim — these are all temporary designations of body and personal belief, designations that can change. They have a beginning and end in time. Therefore, they are not sanatana dharma, the true, eternal religion of all.

But if one finds the principles of sanatana dharma in the teachings of Christianity, Islam, or whatever, one should accept them, without considering the label or point of origin. Thus, the Hare Krishna religion teaches true non-sectarianism, as stated earlier, encouraging everyone to embrace any path that genuinely links one to God. As Prabhupada says:

> One may learn about his relationship with God by any process — through Christianity, through the Vedic literature, or through the Koran — but in any case it must be learned. The purpose of this Krishna Consciousness movement is not to make Christians into Hindus or Hindus into Christians but to inform everyone that the duty of a human being is to understand his relationship with God.[67]

Srila Prabhupada's conception of true dharma, of a one-world religion, is so powerful that to him, sectarianism seems absurd:

> What is sectarianism? In every sect, the child is dependent upon the parents. What do you mean by sectarianism? Does it mean that the Hindu child is not dependent upon his parents? The Muslim child does not depend upon his parents? Everyone depends upon the parents. Either he may be a Hindu child, a Christian child, or a Muslim child, it does not matter. That is the nature of children. Similarly, you may be Hindu or Muslim, but you are dependent upon God. This is a fact. So what is this sectarianism? Can the Muslims say that, "No, no. We are not dependent upon God?" Can the Christians say like that? We have to take the general condition: everyone is dependent upon God. Where is the question of sectarianism? Take this cloud up above: everyone here is expecting some rain. Does it mean that it is Muslim rain or Hindu rain or Christian rain? All rain is dependent upon the clouds. That's all. Hindu, Muslim, Christian — you are not independent of the cloud. Why declare your independence from God?

Prabhupada elaborates on the importance of searching out true religion wherever one may find it, although he clearly expresses his personal faith in the Vedic tradition, which has to its credit the most comprehensive and time-honored religious texts known to man:

> If one is serious about understanding God, he should not think, "I am Christian," "I am Hindu," or "I am Muslim." [Instead] he should consider which process is practical. One should not think, "Why should I follow Hindu or Vedic scriptures?" The purpose

of following the Vedic scriptures is to develop love of God. When students come to America for a higher education, they do not consider the fact that the teachers may be American, German, or of other nationalities. If one wants a higher education, he simply comes and takes it. Similarly, if there is an effective process for understanding and approaching God, like this Krishna Consciousness process, one should take it.[68]

Conversion to What?

Quotes such as the ones above give us reason to pause: is Prabhupada recommending conversion? Does he see his tradition as better than all others?

If we take this quote in tandem with the prior quotes, we see that Prabhupada is not recommending that we jump from one religion to the other, but rather that we look deeply at religious truth and live our lives accordingly. Clearly, he sees the Vaishnava tradition as more inclusive, and the Vedic scriptures as more comprehensive. And he would certainly recommend that one, if so inclined, should embrace these things. But to what end? This is the crucial point. It is not to gather greater numbers for Hinduism or for some other sectarian concern. Rather, he is asking people to look for a scientific procedure for developing love of God. If they can do this through any of the sectarian traditions, then by all means, they should. But he recommends Vaishnavism because he knows it works.

Prabhupada says:

> Yes, I don't say that Christians should become Hindu. I simply say, "Please obey your commandments." I'll make you a better Christian. That is my mission. I don't say, "God is not in your tradition; God is only here in ours." I simply say, "Obey God." I don't say, "You have to accept that God's name is Krishna and no other." No, I say, "Please obey God. Please try to love God."[69]

Thus, if Prabhupada's teachings are about conversion at all, they are about converting one from a materialist to a spiritualist. That is all. His concern is that one practice religion sincerely and passionately. And because he was himself a practitioner of Vaishnava dharma, he was confident that he could teach others to do the same. Prabhupada did not accept the idea of an exclusive revelation, or a chosen people, or only one savior, and he therefore did not think in terms of conversion. Rather, he claimed that God appears in various forms, times, and places, to speak a language of religion to every culture, in order to establish various aspects of His law and His love. According to Prabhupada, God's love for humanity and His capacity for appearing before finite human creatures were far too powerful to be restricted or limited to a particular time, place, or culture. His teaching is thus non-sectarian, while emphasizing the prestigious Vaishnava tradition. While he was uninterested in conversion, he wanted to share the Vaishnava science of how to develop love for God.

The Joy of No Sects

The International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) is based on non-sectarian spiritual principles, and it endorses all forms of religious expression that adhere to such principles. As if to underline this point, the Srimad Bhagavatam, one of the movement's main scriptural texts, begins with a question, "What is the essential or real religion of humankind?"

The lead speaker of the Bhagavatam offered his realization on the matter: "The essential religion for all people is that which brings a person to the point of pure, unalloyed devotional service to God. Such loving service, if it is to fully satisfy the self, must be both unmotivated and uninterrupted" (SB1.2.6). Clearly, this definition of religion speaks to the underlying principle of non-sectarianism.

Are there any Hindus, Muslims, Jews, or Christians who would debate this point? Wouldn't they all admit that the practice and goal of religion is to follow the commands of God and to become His loving servant?

But the Srimad Bhagavatam, in particular, explains this practice and goal as an exacting science, more than one will find in other religious texts. This is not a biased opinion, and readers are welcome to make a comparative study. Whereas other religious literature tells us that God is great, the Bhagavatam reveals exactly how God is great, with details of His various energies and incarnations. Whereas other religious literature hints at His divine kingdom, the Bhagavatam describes this kingdom — its different levels and manifestations — with clarity and precision.

Therefore, Prabhupada often compared the Vedic literature to an unabridged dictionary, and the other spiritual texts of the world to an abridged version. The information is the same, but more details are available from the unexpurgated texts: the Vedas and their corollaries, such as the Bhagavatam.

Given this analogy, it might seem that Prabhupada was playing favorites, but he wasn't. He saw all authentic religion as just so many manifestations of the same spiritual truth, and this is recognized by all who have made a thorough investigation into his teachings.

Although the Internet is not necessarily the place to go for conclusive knowledge, Wikipedia, online encyclopedia, gets it right when it comes to the non-sectarian nature of Krishna Consciousness:

> Non-sectarian in its ideals, ISKCON was formed to spread the practice of bhakti-yoga (The Yoga of Devotion), in which aspirant devotees (bhaktas) dedicate their thoughts and actions towards pleasing the Supreme Lord, Krishna (seen as non-different from God).[70]

The evils of sectarianism are well known, causing not only vicious disputes among various religions, but even in-house fighting amongst members of what might ostensibly be considered the same religion, leading to an ever-increasing number of factions. Violent conflict, often drawn along religious and political lines, is common. Note the long-term battle between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, or that between Shia and Sunni Muslims.

True non-sectarianism espouses tolerance of different beliefs, as long as those beliefs are consistent with the universal principles of spirituality found in all revealed scriptures, and is the cornerstone of successful peaceful human interaction. It espouses political and religious pluralism.

Bhaktivinoda Thakura, in his masterwork, Krishna Samhita (8.22), tells us:

> The eleventh obstacle for the Vaishnavas is sectarianism, which takes the shape of the forest fire. Due to sectarianism a person cannot accept anyone outside of his own group as a Vaishnava, and as a result he faces many obstacles in finding a guru and associating with sincere devotees. Therefore extinguishing this forest fire is most important, and it begins by giving up this mentality of sectarianism.
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> Party spirit — that great enemy of truth — will always baffle the attempt to gain higher realization, causing a bad attitude toward religions from beyond one's nation. It will make an otherwise sensible person believe that the Absolute Truth is nowhere except in his own religious books.

To me, personally, the words of Bhaktivinoda always rang true, and it is one of the things that initially attracted me to the Krishna Consciousness movement. It just makes sense. Here is how I look at it: just as man is made of an inner soul (the real Self) and an outer covering (the body), religion seems to have both internal and external dimensions. The internal aspect to religion is the esoterica, the mystical traditions associated with every major religion. This is the heart of religious practice, and it runs counter to superficiality — the kind of superficiality that leads to an "us and them" mentality, the kind of mentality that leads to war.

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One rarely sees religious wars being fought by Christian mystics, Kabbalists, Sufis, Vaishnavas, and so on. More commonly, wars are fought by those who embrace external interpretations of religion, or those who come to identify religion only in terms of its outer shell. Such adherents may even be well-meaning, sincere, and devout, but if they do not dig deep, if they do not absorb the mystical core of their tradition, they will likely perceive its surface teachings only, which necessarily discounts those of other faiths.

Non-sectarianism, which is the hallmark of every major religion's mystical tradition, allows for peace, tolerance, and mutual understanding. It asks for pluralism and inclusivism, ideas that stem from the realization that we are all God's children, even if we choose to worship in ways that are alien to our neighbors. It is only such a broad and far-reaching vision that will put an end to the kind of religious violence seen on September 11, as well as the kind of religious violence we see throughout the world.

Srila Prabhupada sums up the point nicely in an open letter to the people of Bangkok (dated December 14, 1974):

> The Krishna Consciousness mission is not sectarian. We want to do what the United Nations has failed to do. The human form of body is an opportunity for solving all the problems of life. Through evolution we come to the human life for solving this problem. The real problem is the repetition of birth, death, disease, and old age.
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> But there is another status of life where there is no birth, death, disease, and old age. The Krishna Consciousness movement is the means for promoting the human being to that status. This is a great science, and it is elaborately explained in the Bhagavad Gita.
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> So our mission is to give this benediction to all humanity. Let us cooperate together on this basis so that it will be a more effective United Nations, We shall be united on the basis of the prime need of human society, spiritual life.

This is indeed the joy of no sects.

What the Hell is Hell, Anyway?

I was talking with a Christian friend recently who happens to be a noted Anglican priest, and our conversation turned to the subject of Hell. In the Revelation of John, he told me, there is mention of "a lake of fire," which is basically an abode of punishment for evil-doers. It is also described as a "bottomless abyss." He further told me that Jesus himself spoke of Hell as a place where "the worm doesn't die and the fire is never quenched," an abode of eternal darkness, destruction, and death.

All well and good, and I told him that there are similar descriptions in the Vedic literature. One need look no further than the Srimad Bhagavatam (Canto 5, Chapter 26) for the most gruesome of details.

But then, after a few moments, the conversation went in another direction entirely. My Christian friend began to talk of Hell as figurative, and he gave numerous examples to show that, in much of the Bible, philosophical points are conveyed through metaphor and simile, and that Hell is no exception.

One example stands out: he said that God is described as a hen brooding over her chicks. Clearly, he noted, the Ultimate Being is not really a fowl, not in any sense of the word. He concluded by saying that the teachings of the Church tend to support a non-literal reading of Hell. What is really being talked about in biblical descriptions of the Nether regions, he asserted, are inner states of being, Hellish forms of consciousness that, in effect, situate one in a Hellish condition of life. Whether or not these souls go to an actual destination after death is, for the Christian, a matter of debate.

Vedic Hell

The Vedic literature describes almost 100 different regions known as Hellish planets, actual places of suffering in lower universes where errant souls go for rectification, so that they might one day rise again and have an opportunity to meet their Maker.

We are first introduced to these planets in the Rig Veda. In its very first section (hymn 32), we read of a battle between the demigod Indra and a serpent named Vritra. The latter is defeated and descends downward to the lower regions of the universe, to lower planets where suffering prevails. The Sanskrit word naraka is used, which is generally translated as "underworld of man" or, put simply, "Hell."

We read in the Mahabharata, too, of King Yudhishthira's journey to Hell, and how he went there merely to see his friends and family; he knew that they should not have been there, that they were in fact righteous and that their presence there was some kind of trick. And as the story turns out, he was right.

The description of Hell in this section is comparable to the Judeo-Christian idea of it: it is a dense, dark environment, overwrought with mangled body parts. Those who go there are devoured by horrible insects, who chew the life out of all beings. Intolerable smells permeate the atmosphere, making normal breathing impossible. One's body is perpetually accosted by flying animals who are so fearsome that the heart stops.

In the Ramayana, the demon-king Ravana literally goes to Hell, too, though he clearly deserved to be there. When he arrives, he is confronted with Yamaraja, lord of death, and his attendants, who are themselves unsightly, creating fear and anxiety for anyone who draws near. Ravana becomes privy to a Hell that fits much the same description that we find in the Mahabharata.

The Puranas also tell us of the immense suffering associated with Hellish planets. The Markandeya Purana, the Vamana Purana, the Padma Purana, and the Bhagavatam, among others, are all replete with descriptions of Hell in its various forms. But where exactly are these Hellish planets to be found?

The question is asked directly by Maharaja Parikshit, last of the great Vedic kings:

> King Pariksit inquired from Sukadeva Gosvami: my dear Lord, are the Hellish regions outside the universe, within the covering of the universe, or in different places on this planet? (SB 5.26.4)

And the answer is just as direct:

> Sukadeva Gosvami answered: all the Hellish planets are situated in the intermediate space between the three worlds and the

> Garbhodaka Ocean. They lie on the southern side of the universe, beneath Bhu-mandala, and slightly above the water of the Garbhodaka Ocean. Pitrloka is also located in this region between the Garbhodaka Ocean and the lower planetary systems. All the residents of Pitrloka, headed by Agnisvatta, meditate in great samadhi on the Supreme Personality of Godhead and always wish their families well. (SB 5.26.5)

A careful reading of the Bhagavatam (Third and Fifth Cantos) reveals that, ultimately, Hell is a subtle phenomenon. It is not that there is no actual, physical place that constitutes a region of Hell, but it is one's state of consciousness and one's perceived reality that makes it Hell or not. For a pure devotee of the Lord, there is no Hell, though he might travel to the Nether regions for the sake of helping others. For an impure soul, no place is actually Heaven, though he may, at times, be born in pious conditions on higher planets. Still, he will inevitably fall, for that is his nature. In other words, when one dies, leaving the physical body behind, the astral body experiences an appropriate Heaven or Hell according to the deeds perpetrated while in physical form. Being absorbed in this consciousness carries one to their next destination, whether higher or lower worlds, until one's karma is used up, thus allowing a soul to move forward yet again.

Karma and Hell

Vedic texts establish a clear relationship between earthly action, or karma (action and its concomitant reaction), and where we go after death. If we act in "good ways" we tend to move upward, to Heavenly planets. And if not, we go downward, to Hell. There is a hint of this in day to day life, and there is nothing very mystical about it. If we eat well, for example, our body generally thrives, and if we eat harmful, non-nutritious foods, we suffer, and our existence becomes a kind of Hell. This can be seen in our quality of life. In this way, by understanding the law of karma, we can unlock the mystery of Heaven and Hell, which turns out to not be much of a mystery at all. Bottom line: if we learn what truly good works are, and if we abide by them, we will generally reap good results. If we act contrary to what is in our best interest, and in the best interest of those around us, negative influences engulf our lives, sending us into a downward spiral, ending in Hell.

But there is more: by learning what transcendental activity is, and by engaging in these spiritual works (akarma), one can bid adieu to both Heaven and Hell and be promoted to the kingdom of God. As Jimi Hendrix famously sung, "Good and evil lay side by side while electric love penetrates the sky." Essentially, without fully understanding it, he was pointing to a higher truth: that the duality of the material world — good and bad, Heaven and Hell — needs to be transcended, and that all souls should come to a higher love. This is bhakti-yoga.

A Hellish Metaphor

One might legitimately ask: but is Hell a mere metaphor, or is it a literal place where one goes at the time of death? The great Gaudiya Vaishnava acharya Bhaktivinoda Thakura has written as follows:

> In the commonplace books of the Hindu religion in which the rajo and tamo-guna have been described as the ways of religion, we have descriptions of a local Heaven and a local Hell; the Heaven as beautiful as anything on earth and the Hell as ghastly as any picture of evil. Besides this Heaven we have many more places, where good souls are sent up in the way of promotion! There are 84 divisions of the Hell itself, some more dreadful than the one which Milton has described in his Paradise Lost.
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> These are certainly poetical and were originally created by the rulers of the country in order to check evil deeds of the ignorant people, who are not able to understand the conclusions of philosophy. The religion of the Bhagavata is free from such poetry. Indeed, in some of the chapters we meet with descriptions of these Hells and Heavens, and accounts of curious tales, but we have been warned somewhere in the book, not to accept them as real facts, but as inventions to overawe the wicked and to improve the simple and the ignorant. The Bhagavata certainly tells us of a state of reward and punishment in the future according to deeds in our present situation.
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> All poetic inventions, besides this spiritual fact, have been described as statements borrowed from other works in the way of preservation of old traditions in the book which superseded them and put an end to the necessity of their storage.[71]

Just what is Bhaktivinoda expressing here? Clearly, there is more to his proclamations about Heaven and Hell than meet the eye. After all, he was the enthusiastic inheritor of a tradition that promoted a literal view of texts such as the Bhagavatam verses quoted above. He comes from a line of teachers that would consider his interpretation, if taken at face value, anathema, without even one of them having ever expressed similar ideas.

It is therefore worth looking at the Thakur's statements more closely. Initially, he opines that in "commonplace religious texts" one generally finds poetic descriptions of Heaven and Hell. These descriptions, he writes, are presented by rulers and kings to curtail the evil deeds of ignorant people. That being said, he hastens to add that "The religion of the Bhagavat[am] is free from such poetry." This is the first point: the Srimad Bhagavatam is not like other commonplace religious texts whose agenda in describing numerous forms of Hell is for the purpose of controlling the ignorant.

The Thakur also tells us something about the descriptions of Heaven and Hell as they appear in the Bhagavatam: "but we have been warned somewhere in the book (Bhagavat) not to accept them as real facts." He thus refers to the Bhagavatam to make a claim that its descriptions of Heaven and Hell are intended to invoke an underlying spiritual essence. For those who know the text, it is obvious that he is referring to verses 11.19.31 and 11.19.42-43. Here, Uddhava asks Lord Krishna, "What are Heaven and Hell?" and Krishna replies, "Heaven is the predominance of the mode of goodness, whereas Hell is a predominance of ignorance." This speaks to my analysis above, where I argued that Heaven and Hell are really states of consciousness, first and foremost, goodness taking one upward and ignorance down to "Hell."

None of this, of course, implies that physical regions of Heaven and Hell are nonexistent. Rather, such descriptions serve as a device to help people from straying and perhaps ending up in the wrong place (i.e., Hell). For example, if one's wayward teenage son is found smoking an occasional cigarette, the parent might attempt to scare him by saying that smoking will likely lead to cancer, and then she might describe the horrors one's body goes through as a result of contracting the disease. This graphic description would be for the boy's benefit. The parent might indeed be stretching the truth, or at least telling the truth with a particular agenda. This does not mean that cancer does not exist, and it is certainly true that the person who smokes might possibly contract it. Though it is unlikely that a casual teenage smoker would end up with cancer as a result of a few cigarettes (assuming it led to nothing more than that), the threat might indeed make the boy think twice before engaging in such questionable activity with any regularity.

In the end, Bhaktivinoda saw the texts as both metaphorical and literal. There is a Hell to which one might go, but overall, the texts serve "as inventions to overawe the wicked and to improve the simple and the ignorant."

Conclusion

I mentioned all this to my Christian friend, who was attempting to reconcile my few words about Bhaktivinoda with something he had just read in his own tradition: the Religion News Service reported that a Vatican-approved editorial agrees with the Pope's latest pronouncement, which was this: "Hell exists, not as a place but as a state, a way of being of the person who suffers the pain of the deprivation of God."[72] The Pope said eternal damnation is "not God's work but is actually our own doing." Yes, I agreed, it is karma, an action-reaction schema, as I mentioned earlier. This decides if we are in Heaven or Hell.

After this, my friend pulled out a Time magazine article in which Billy Graham was quoted as follows:

> The only thing I could say for sure is that Hell means separation from God. We are separated from his light, from his fellowship. That is going to be Hell. When it comes to a literal fire, I don't preach it because I'm not sure about it. When the Scripture uses fire concerning Hell, that is possibly an illustration of how terrible it's going to be—not fire but something worse, a thirst for God that cannot be quenched.[73]

This is a truth that Bhaktivinoda would never deny.

The Four Noble Truths

In examining the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism, I came to realize that these same truths lay at the basis of Vaishnava thought. Indeed, the Bhagavad Gita includes numerous verses that mention suffering and the means by which it is vanquished, particularly in 2.48, 2.65, 5.29, 6.17, 6.22-23, and 14.20. There are others as well. I will attempt to summarize the Gita's teaching in this regard. The Four Noble Truths are (1) the truth of suffering, of the universality of suffering; (2) the truth of the origin of suffering, which is related to suffering as an ontological reality; (3) the truth of the cessation of suffering; and (4) the truth of the Path, which is integrally related to the cessation of suffering.

In both Buddhism and Vaishnavism, we think deeply about life and material nature — not just the beauty of nature, but also the harsh reality of existence. Contrary to what many might think, it is not necessarily negative to take a good, hard look at the difficult aspects of being. Rather, when guided by a self-realized teacher, it can be a first step toward spiritual enlightenment. Unless we are frightfully aware of the distasteful side of life, we are likely to become its victims. Once victimized by material existence, it is difficult to pursue higher matters.

The plain fact is this: all happiness or pleasure in this world is temporary, and so suffering, to one degree or another, is unavoidable. So, far from being a sour grapes sort of philosophy, it is simply realistic to acknowledge and even explore the implications of pain and suffering. Most of the world's spiritual traditions, therefore, recommend cultivating knowledge of nescience and transcendence side-by-side, so that one can gradually rise beyond the mundane and become situated in a life of true goodness.

This is a gradual evolution that takes time, from ignorance, to passion, to goodness, to pure goodness, or transcendence. To this end, Buddhism and Vaishnavism, in particular, do not shy away from educating adherents about the stark miseries of material life. There are fundamental meditations in both Buddhist and Vaishnava traditions that are meant to make practitioners aware of the inevitability of birth, death, old age, and disease, for example, and how these phenomena impact upon people's lives. Knowledge of these things can serve as a catalyst to move beyond materialism and to pursue divinity in earnest.

Regarding birth, death, old age, and disease, the Buddha's own story is worth recounting: Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, was a noble prince, and in his youth he was sheltered from the miseries of life. When the Prince traveled out of his kingdom for the first time and saw a dying person, a person giving birth, a diseased person, and an aged person, he asked his servant if such hardship, or suffering, was common. His servant responded by telling him that these calamities, in one way or another, necessarily afflict man in his sojourn through life. At that moment the Buddha resolved to find the solution to suffering.

The ancient Vedic texts of India hone in on three kinds of suffering: suffering caused by one's own body and mind; suffering caused by the bodies and minds of others; and suffering that comes from natural calamities. In Sanskrit, suffering is known as duhkha, a word that carries implications of "pain," "distress," "grief," "affliction," and "frustration." Buddhists use this same term, saying that duhkha comes from avidya, or "ignorance." We say the same thing. Srila Prabhupada began his work in the West with the notion that people are suffering due to want of knowledge. He claimed that spiritual knowledge was the only thing that could alleviate their suffering. It was for this reason that he tirelessly labored to translate ancient Vedic texts and to personally teach how to live a life of spiritual fervor. He deeply felt the suffering of others and wanted to help them rise beyond such suffering.

Ignorance begins by one's identification with the body. When the life-force, or the soul within the body, misidentifies with the aggregate of material elements — which is only the body, even if we see it as our actual selves — it begins a life of illusion, and this is the seed of all suffering to follow. The Bhagavad Gita boldly declares the difference between body and soul, and that ignorance, illusion, and, consequently, suffering come from the soul's erroneous identification with matter. This can be a difficult subject in Buddhist teaching, but it is nevertheless the case that the earliest forms of Indian Buddhism accepted the Vedic conclusion about the nature of the soul and reincarnation. This is true, too, of most forms of northern Buddhism, or Mahayana Buddhism, and it is fundamental to Tibetan Buddhism as well.

But even those forms of Buddhism that reject the idea of a soul are adamant that illusion, and thus suffering, come from the body. Such forms of Buddhism merely start from the next step. That is, rather

than focus on the difference between the body and the self, they ask, "What are the implications of bodily identification?"

So let us use that as a starting point. What are the implications of bodily identification? For one, bodily identification breeds desire, or craving. In Buddhism, this is called tanha or trishna, words that imply "greediness" and "pandering to the senses." If you have a body, it is natural to be concerned for its needs. But most people go far beyond the body's needs. They become absorbed in excessive sense gratification. Prabhupada compared sense gratification to salt: if you add too much to a given preparation, you will spoil it, and the preparation will be spoiled if you add too little as well.

Thus, both Buddhism and Vaishnavism propose a "middle path," if you will — a path that does not deny the senses but does not overly indulge them, either. As the Gita's second chapter informs us, all misery begins when one contemplates the objects of the senses. This contemplation leads to self-interested action and, eventually, attachment. This gives rise to anger, because the pleasures of this world are temporary, as we have noted, and so they inevitably come to an end. We eventually lose the objects of our attachment. This makes us angry. When we are angry, the Gita says, we cannot think clearly. We become bewildered. This leads to loss of memory. At this point, intelligence is lost. (The Gita defines intelligence as good memory and fine discretion.) Naturally, in such a state of mind, one cannot pursue spiritual life. So these are some introductory ideas about suffering and the causes of suffering.

The third Noble Truth is that of the cessation of suffering. If all suffering comes from desire, then the cessation of suffering comes from the extinguishing of desire. This is somewhat problematic. Where there is self, there is self-interest. It is thus natural to desire. We want the best for ourselves and our loved ones. The question, then, is not desire, but rather inordinate desire, or that desire which, again, is unnecessary, or excessive. The Buddhist and the Vaishnava both work at quieting unnecessary passions or desires, and, conversely, cultivating desires of the spirit, pursuing passion for truth.

To dedicate one's life to the path of Buddhism or Vaishnavism requires dedication, commitment, determination, and even passion. One must desire the goal of Buddhism or Vaishnavism, of one's chosen path. Someone may put forth the Zen-like idea that one only reaches the goal when one ceases to doggedly pursue it. But this is only partly true. If one pursues truth for truth itself, devoid of ego, this is entirely appropriate. In other words, one must pursue it for the right reasons. If one does not desire enlightenment, at least on some level, one will never achieve it.

The point is to get beyond selfish cravings and self-interested desires, and by so doing, to realize one's bonding with all that exists. In Vaishnavism, this is called the brahma-bhuta stage, wherein one sees all living beings equally and does not distinguish or judge because of material differences. If one can reach this level of enlightenment, one can raise oneself beyond all material suffering. In Buddhism, it is said that this is achieved by following the Path — which means different things to different people — and this brings us to the Fourth Noble Truth of Buddhism.

In Buddhism, the Path tells us to do things in "the right way." It is the Eightfold Path, consisting of the right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. In Vaishnavism, this is called the mode of goodness, and it is difficult to achieve. Indeed, in this age, few are able to truly act properly, and if, after much practice, they find that they can, they will be doing a great thing for themselves and for the world around them. The Eightfold Path is thus the most noble of goals.

I must say, however, that, in my humble opinion, if one actually achieves this goal — to perfection — one will be acting in Krishna Consciousness, or Vaishnavism. For, ultimately, to act properly is to act for our source. To behave in the right way is to behave in the way in which our creator intended. Some may disagree, but the God question haunts us even if we find Him irrelevant or not necessary for liberation, as is often the case in Buddhistic thought. What religion in general, and Vaishnavism in particular, has to offer is this: positive information about the world beyond suffering. Both Buddhism and Vaishnavism agree that this is a world of suffering, but what lies beyond this world? In the Vaishnava tradition, we learn of Vaikuntha, the spiritual realm, a place where the chief characteristics are eternity, knowledge, and bliss, the exact opposite of temporality, ignorance, and suffering. Although the material world is a land of exploitation, the spiritual realm is described as the land of dedication and the land of love.

The Buddhist goal is nirvana, which is generally translated as "the extinguishing of all material desires," or "freedom from birth and death." It is a negative goal in that it does not emphasize any positive destination. It is only the end of all things material. From a Vaishnava point of view, nirvana

can be called “the forest of emptiness.” This is a play on its Sanskrit components nir and vana, in which nir means “without,” “lacking,” and so on, and vana, in this sense, means “forest.” Although this is an inaccurate Sanskrit derivation, it nicely illuminates the Vaishnava goal, which augments that of Buddhism: Vrindavana, or the forest of Vrindavana. This is “the forest of variegatedness” (as opposed to the forest of emptiness). Radha-Krishna are there, along with countless devotees, trees, creepers, animals, sounds, and colors. It is brimming with life. Instead of nirvana, an emptying of all things material, the Vaishnavas seek Vrindavana, the embracing of all things spiritual.

There are Buddhist traditions, too, that speak of higher realms: lands of demigods and higher beings. But, to my knowledge, only in the Vaishnava tradition does one find exacting details about the abode of Krishna, the Supreme Personality of Godhead, and how to get there. This is where I would like to go if I ever achieve perfection on my path, and that is perhaps why I have chosen the path of Vaishnavism. On one occasion when the Dalai Lama was in New York, I was fortunate enough to hear him give a lecture. After explaining that he respected all spiritual paths and that all paths have merit, he admitted that he was particularly partial to Buddhism, and that is why he is a Buddhist. I must confess that I, too, share a similar prejudice. While I acknowledge that all revealed traditions are worthy of respect and have a good deal to offer, I can only attempt to approach the truth through the Vaishnava tradition. But there is always much to be learned by examining the beliefs of traditions other than our own — indeed, we may be surprised at how much it complements our own faith.

Diet for Transcendence: An Interview with Steven J. Rosen[74]

Integral Yoga Magazine (IYM): How did you start writing about vegetarianism, what inspired you?

Steven Rosen (SR): When I was a teenager, I was looking for dharma, or "essential truth," which is found at the core of all religious traditions. This led me to perceive certain unifying threads in the world religions, like the soul, or how the inner living being is different from the material body; its related idea of reincarnation; and then ahimsa, non-violence, leading to vegetarianism. If you look deeply enough, you'll find these connecting threads in all religious traditions, at least in the mystical branches of these traditions.

I noticed that there were good books out there on vegetarianism from biological, nutritional, and animal rights perspectives. There were also good books on vegetarianism in relation to each of the major world religions: Richard Schwartz wrote an excellent book on Judaism and vegetarianism; Andrew Linzey wrote many on Christianity and vegetarianism; Philip Kapleau wrote a superb treatise on Buddhism and vegetarianism; Al-Hafiz B. A. Masri wrote convincingly on Islam and vegetarianism; and the Hare Krishna movement produced several important works, based squarely on scripture, about why good Hindus should be vegetarian. But no one gathered all of this information together in one place. So that became my task. I decided to write a book that puts together all of this information, and that's how I wrote Diet for Transcendence: Vegetarianism and the World Religions (Torchlight, 2003).

IYM: You mentioned the mystical branches of the various religions and the principle of non-violence. Would you elaborate?

SR: Every religion has an aspect of ahimsa that's more pronounced in its mystical traditions. And, there is quite a history behind the abandonment of animal rights and the deletion of scriptural texts dealing with the equitable treatment of animals. I tend to look at religion like a person. A person has the external body and the soul within. All religions have those two components. The external body is comprised of the rituals and customs. The soul is the more internal teaching, which you find among the mystics. The idea of kindness and the Golden Rule is found almost verbatim in each faith. The idea of ahimsa and not causing unnecessary harm is a thread, and if you study religion superficially, you don't find these unifying threads.

IYM: Would you give us an overview of these unifying threads?

SR: Ancient India's scriptural legacy, the Vedic literature, was originally emphatic in its support of monotheism and animal rights, even if there was also a tradition of animal sacrifice mentioned in those same texts. God was seen as Brahman, the Supreme Spirit. He was the ultimate Father much as He is in the Judeo-Christian tradition, and all living entities were seen as His children. So deeply ingrained was the tradition of ahimsa that saints, sages and prophets of the ancient Vedic tradition were particularly strong advocates of animal rights. There are over 700,000,000 Hindu vegetarians today — this includes 83% of India's current population. We also find in scriptures, like the Mahabharata, the key phrase ahimsa paro dharmo. This means, "Ahimsa is the highest duty. One's highest dharma is to be non-violent. Therefore, if you are going to really try to link with God, which is the goal of yoga, you have to give up the use of animal foods.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition you have the commandment: "Thou shalt not kill." For decades, the difference between the terms "kill" and "murder" have been debated. Several studies discuss the significance of this commandment from a vegetarian point of view. The most notable work would be Aaron Frankel's "Thou Shalt Not Kill": The Torah of Vegetarianism, published in 1896. Since then, only a handful of outspoken vegetarian advocates have explained the commandment in terms of their dietary preference. Literalists might tightly cling to the primary definitions, saying that murder refers only to humans, and that this is where the argument should end. But, as if anticipating this response, the Bible tells us, "He that killeth an ox is as if he slew a man." (Isaiah 66.3). For me, the bottom line of the kill versus murder argument is: don't do any unnecessary killing.

IYM: What about in Islam?

SR: The Islamic mystics, or Sufis, are well-known for being vegetarian. In the mid-1980s I interviewed Bawa Muhaiyaddeen, and he was adamant that a good Muslim would be vegetarian.

Islamic tradition holds that in Mecca, the birthplace of Muhammad, no creature can be slaughtered and that perfect harmony should exist between all living things. Muhammad was very compassionate to animals, and it is told how a cat fell asleep on the sleeve of his cloak when he needed it, and the Prophet was so concerned not to disturb the cat's sleep that he cut the sleeve from the cloak to take it with him! We see this reflected in the names of God in Islam: the two most frequently used names are al-Rahim (the All Compassionate) and al-Raham (the All Merciful). God is not called the "semi-compassionate." God is not compassionate only to humans, but is All Compassionate. Think about the implications.

IYM: Thich Naht Hahn is vegetarian, but not all the Buddhists teachers are.
SR: Original Indian Buddhism was fully given to the principle of ahimsa, harmlessness, which to this day is considered the first of Buddhism's nine major precepts. But as Buddhism traveled to other lands, such as China, Japan, Burma, Cambodia, Tibet, Thailand, and Vietnam, among other places, the essential teaching of animal rights and its concomitant principle of ahimsa had become severely compromised. Of the two chief branches known today, Mahayana and the older Theravada, both are tolerant of meat-eating and have lost virtually all sight of animal rights. This is less so in Mahayana Buddhism, where meat consumption is still somewhat frowned upon. Monastic orders, of course, are stricter in regard to abstinence from flesh foods.

Contemporary Buddhist movements, such as the Buddhists Concerned for Animal Rights, are interested in reestablishing the roots of ahimsa sensibility. And certain Buddhist denominations, such as the Cao Dai sect, which originated in South Vietnam, now boasts some two million followers, all of whom are vegetarian. In Zen Buddhist monasteries, no meat or fish is allowed. The monks try to observe the old laws and observe strict rules of discipline.

IYM: If so many religions recommend a vegetarian diet, why don't more people follow their religion's edicts? And, sometimes we hear people, even yoga practitioners, saying, "Well, I used to be a vegetarian, but it's all about intention, and my intentions are so pure I can eat anything."
SR: First of all, most people take their religions out of context. They pull out a verse that supports their desires, but if they look at the tradition deeply, they will see an All Compassionate God and will realize that every living thing deserves our compassion. We can make all kinds of arguments. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the common conception is an Aristotelian one. Aristotle's idea was that everything could be broken up into separate compartments — science, mathematics, and so on. The Aristotelian-Cartesian worldview is a very mechanistic view of reality. In such a view, animals can be easily treated as machines that are here for our pleasure. St. Thomas Aquinas also believed in this. So, you have that point of view that makes humans the only focus. But, then there is also the Platonic-Franciscan point of view, which is a more creation-centered spirituality. This worldview says that humans are not the center of the universe; we are part of the universe, and animals have as much a right to life as we do.

If someone, after many years of spiritual practice, goes back to eating meat, they can rationalize this, but it's not based on any religious sensibility or logic. If you really understand ahimsa, there is no going beyond that. There are active religious groups such as the Jewish Vegetarian Society and Christians Concerned for Animals that link the practice of their faith with principles of non-violence.

IYM: Of course, there is the argument that in some areas of the world, it's not possible to eat a vegetarian diet.
SR: If someone is living where there are no vegetarian alternatives, then yes. But, largely, we are not in that situation. Even in the Vedic literature, the warriors who were doing battle out in the jungles were permitted to eat meat. But, they had to hunt and kill it themselves if they wanted to eat meat. They couldn't go to the supermarket to get it. If people had to do the killing, there would be less meat-eaters, because when you kill the animal yourself, you can't pretend you are not eating a dead animal!

IYM: Jain monks wear masks that cover their noses and mouths to prevent themselves from harming small insects and organisms, and they sweep in front of where they are walking so as to not step on any living thing. Is that extreme?
SR: Those practices are for Jain monks, not for those who are living and working in the world. All of living involves some killing. One type of living entity is food for another. The best you can do is to minimize the killing. A vegetarian does the least amount of harm to sentient beings. Jainism has over

four million followers, all of whom are strict vegetarians. In India, Jains are famous for their animal hospitals, and they have elevated animal rights to a religious principle.

IYM: Animal rights as a religious principle?
SR: Kindness to all creatures is, of course, a fundamental religious principle, and sages of all traditions have endorsed it. But kindness to all creatures is only part of religious practice, not the central focus. It is not an end in and of itself. Devotion to the animal kingdom should not replace devotion to God!

The Scent Of Happiness: A Lesson in Pleasure Seeking

The search for happiness is natural, because it is the constitutional position of the spirit soul to be eternally joyful. But our search for happiness in the external, physical world is always frustrated; we look everywhere, never realizing permanent pleasure. Temporary, relative pleasure is certainly here to be had, but it is always accompanied by its counterpart: pain. Those who are wise, then, look within, learning how to pursue not only the relative pleasure of this world but, more to the point, they focus on the higher pleasure of the spiritual realm.

The musk deer, an animal native to Central Asia, gives us a hint to the solution of our predicament. The creature is known for a particular scent with which we are all familiar. Originally, this scent is produced from a tiny glandular sac located just beneath the skin of its abdomen (though only in the male of the species). Not only is the reddish-brown secretion much appreciated by human beings, who use it as a base for many perfumes and incense, but, according to popular lore, the musk deer, too, sometimes goes mad over the powerful fragrance himself. In his madness, he runs wildly about, looking everywhere for the intense scent. Everywhere, that is, except within himself.

Is this leading to some trite proclamation about "the happiness within?" Well, yes and no. Yes, true spiritual practitioners will tell you that by serving the Divine (Krishna, Jehovah, Allah, Brahman, and so on), one feels happiness within — a transcendent happiness that is independent of the fleeting pains and pleasures of the physical body. No, their statement is not trite — it is based on divinely inspired texts, the words of self-realized sages, and, sometimes, on personal experience. So to help us avoid being like the musk deer, running around aimlessly looking for the sweet smell of pleasure, the sages of ancient India point us in the proper direction: they point to our heart of hearts, where Lord Krishna waits for us to turn to Him in a mood of loving devotion.

Every living entity is a spirit soul, part and parcel of the Supreme Soul, Whom we often call "God," and we are entitled to the unlimited spiritual pleasure derived from satisfying the senses of the Divine. Confidential scriptures explain that the Divine, in Its/His/Her highest form, does indeed have transcendental senses, a mystery that requires spiritual realization to fully understand. And these senses are like the inner portion of our own senses. By satisfying these, we satisfy ourselves. It is like watering the root of a tree: all the branches and leaves of the tree automatically receive nourishment.

For our part, the temporary physical body is only a covering over the soul, just as a shirt or coat is only a covering over the body. In comparison to even a drop of the transcendental happiness of serving the Divine, the greatest pleasures of the physical world appear meager.

We just instinctively follow the "scent" of happiness, but if that scent leads us to gratify our bodily senses, rather than to serve and please the Supreme, call Her what you will, we have been fooled. Like the musk deer, we will search vainly in the external world, never experiencing the happiness within.

Other Books by Steven J. Rosen

Food for the Soul: Vegetarianism and Yoga Traditions (Westport, CT.: Praeger Publishers, 2011).

Christ and Krishna: Where the Jordan Meets the Ganges (New York: FOLK Books, 2011).

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Other books published by Arktos:

Beyond Human Rights
by Alain de Benoist

Manifesto for a European Renaissance
by Alain de Benoist & Charles Champetier

The Problem of Democracy
by Alain de Benoist

Germany's Third Empire
by Arthur Moeller van den Bruck

The Arctic Home in the Vedas
by Bal Gangadhar Tilak

Revolution from Above
by Kerry Bolton

The Fourth Political Theory
by Alexander Dugin

Metaphysics of War
by Julius Evola

The Path of Cinnabar:
An Intellectual Autobiography
by Julius Evola

Archeofuturism
by Guillaume Faye

Convergence of Catastrophes
by Guillaume Faye

Why We Fight
by Guillaume Faye

The WASP Question
by Andrew Fraser

The Saga of the Aryan Race volumes 1-2

by Porus Homi Havewala

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The Owls of Afrasiab
by Lars Holger Holm

De Naturae Natura
by Alexander Jacob

Fighting for the Essence
by Pierre Krebs

Can Life Prevail?
by Pentti Linkola

The Ten Commandments of Propaganda
by Brian Anse Patrick

A Handbook of Traditional Living
by Raido

The Jedi in the Lotus:
Star Wars and the Hindu Tradition
by Steven J. Rosen

It Cannot Be Stormed
by Ernst von Salomon

Tradition & Revolution
by Troy Southgate

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by Tomislav Sunic

The Initiate: Journal of Traditional Studies
by David J. Wingfield (ed.)

[1] David A. Cooper, God is a Verb: Kabbalah and the Practice of Mystical Judaism (New York: Riverhead Books, 1997), p. 69.

[2] Richard Buckminster Fuller, I Seem to Be a Verb (New York: Bantam Books, 1970).

[3] Prabhupada is clear that both Krishna and the soul are changeless. About Krishna, we learn: "Due to their small fund of knowledge, they do not know My higher nature, which is **changeless** and supreme." (Bhagavad Gita 7.24) And about the soul, Prabhupada writes in a letter to Jananivasa dated August 27, 1967: "The Spirit Soul is certainly eternal and changeless." Of course, there is an esoteric sense in which God is always expanding, in other words, changing, and the living entity expands with Him — but only in a spiritual sense. God and His energies are essentially dynamic, and there is no end to their expansive nature.

[4] The Flowing Light of the Godhead, Book Seven.

[5] H. P. Owen, Concepts of Deity (London: Macmillan, 1971).

[6] Philip Clayton and Arthur Peacocke (eds.), In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being: Panentheistic Reflections on God's Presence in a Scientific World (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2004).

[7] Needless to say, one who sees "God as all" (pantheism) could easily make the common mistake of identifying oneself with God, since every individual is clearly part of "all." Similarly, one who sees "God in all" (panentheism) might just as easily see the divine in oneself, and thus mistakenly identify with God. But one who has these aforementioned realizations along with Bhagavan realization, worshipping God in a spirit of monotheism, is less likely to fall prey to this misconception.

[8] Graham M. Schweig, "Krishna, the Intimate Divinity," in Edwin F. Bryant and Maria L. Ekstrand (eds.), The Hare Krishna Movement: The Postcharismatic Fate of a Religious Transplant (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), p. 18.

[9] Ultimately, as Dr. Schweig points out, the tradition can be seen as polymorphic bi-monotheism, since it acknowledges a dual-gendered divinity whose ultimate manifestation is Sri-Sri Radha-Krishna. See The Hare Krishna Movement, p. 19.

[10] Helen E. Fisher, Why We Love: The Nature and Chemistry of Romantic Love (New York: Henry Holt, 2004).

[11] From Dharma: The Way of Transcendence.

[12] Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati Goswami, "The Treasure of Bhakti," available at Sri Narasingha Chaitanya Ashram (gosai.com/writings/the-treasure-of-bhakti).

[13] The Harmonist, Vol. 25, No. 10 (March 1928).

[14] Hamlet, Act II, Scene 2.

[15] Jaiva Dharma, Chapter 10.

[16] Arthur Schopenhauer, The World as Will and Representation, Vol. 1 (New York: Dover Publications, 1966), p. 196.

[17] Arthur Schopenhauer, The World as Will and Representation, p. 319.

[18] Katha Upanishad 1.2.18.

[19] Katha Upanishad 1.2.20.

[20] Bhagavad Gita 2.19-20.

[21] Indeed, Ralph Waldo Emerson found these verses inspirational as well, giving his own version in the poem "Brahma," found in the inaugural issue of The Atlantic Monthly. The first stanza reads:

> If the red slayer think he slays,
> Or if the slain think he is slain,
> They know not well the subtle ways
> I keep, and pass, and turn again.

[22] According to the Brahma-vaivarta Purana (Krishna-janma-khanda 185.180), formal sannyasa is described as kali-varjya, or one of several acts that are prohibited in Kali-yuga, our current age of quarrel and hypocrisy. The verse is quoted in the Chaitanya Charitamrita (Adi 17.164). Vaishnava sannyasa is a different conception altogether. It focuses not on renouncing the world as such — even if it incorporates many of the rules and regulations of traditional sannyasa — but on the perfection of yukta-vairagya, using the world in Krishna's service. It was fully accepted by Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu

[23] A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, The Quest for Enlightenment (Los Angeles: Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1997), Chapter Two.

[24] St. Thomas Aquinas, Of God and His creatures: An Annotated Translation (with Some Abridgement) of the Summa contra gentiles of Saint Thomas Aquinas (London: Burns and Oates, 1905), Book Four, Chapter 55.

[25] This interview originally appeared in the Indian edition of Back to Godhead magazine, Vol. 8, No. 6 (June 2011). It was conducted by Chaitanya Charana Dasa.

[26] Published in 2011 as Christ and Krishna: Where the Jordan Meets the Ganges by Folk Books.

[27] Carla Spartos, "We're Having a Meat Wave," in The New York Post (April 16, 2008). Available at The New York Post (www.nypost.com/p/lifestyle/food/item_Geh6sJkOrorwQE1haPCOlK).

[28] In this article, the terms yoga and hatha-yoga are used in a generic sense, referring just as much to raja-yoga and ashtanga-yoga, and the various techniques that today incorporate various forms of pranayama and asana.

[29] Swami Satchidananda, The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali (Yogaville, Virginia: Integral Yoga Publications, 1990), p. xi.

[30] Edwin F. Bryant, “Patanjali’s Theistic Preference, or, Was the Author of the Yoga Sutras a Vaishnava?” in The Journal of Vaishnava Studies, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Fall 2005).

[31] Edwin F. Bryant, “Patanjali’s Theistic Preference, or, Was the Author of the Yoga Sutras a Vaishnava?”

[32] Much of this information is gleaned from the work of Graham M. Schweig. See his article, “‘Eight Limbs’ of the Heart: The Yoga Sutras and the Bhagavad Gita,” interview article for Integral Yoga Magazine, January-February 2007.

[33] “Vaishnavism,” in Otkrytyi Forum 1 (1997), pp. 109–114.

[34] A detailed account of this period has been published: Sarkis Buniatyan, Salted Bread: The True Story of Two Good Friends (Badger, California: Torchlight Publishing, 2007).

[35] Tattva Viveka-Tattva Sutra-Amnaya Sutra: A Comprehensive Exposition of the Spiritual Reality by Bhaktivinoda Thakur (Madras: Sree Gaudiya Math, no date), English translation by Narasimha Brahmacari, Tattva Sutra portion, sutra 35, pp. 185-186.

[36] Bhaktivinoda Thakur, Bhaktyaloka.

[37] From a conversation between Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati Thakur and Prof. Albert E. Suthers, taking place in January 1929 in Krishnanagar.

[38] A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, Dialectic Spiritualism: A Vedic View of Western Philosophy (Prabhupada Books, 1985), conversation about Socrates.

[39] Joseph T. O’Connell, “Chaitanya Vaishnava Devotion (bhakti) and Ethics as Socially Integrative in Sultanate Bengal,” in Bangladesh e-Journal of Sociology, Vol, 8, No. 1 (January 2011), pp. 51-63. Available at www.bangladeshsociology.org/BEJS%208.1%20Final.pdf.

[40] Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati Thakura, “The Tree of Bhakti,” Foreword to The Desire-Creeper of Devotion to Lord Hari by Bhaktivinoda Thakura.

[41] Diana L. Eck, Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India, 3rd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

[42] Chaitanya Charitamrita, Madhya-lila 5.97, purport.

[43] Diana L. Eck, Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India, p. 49.

[44] Diana L. Eck, Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India, p. 46.

[45] Bharatan Kumarappa, The Hindu Conception of the Deity as Culminating in Ramanuja (London: Luzac & Co., 1934), pp. 316–317.

[46] The Aryan Invasion Theory, which argues that the Vedas were brought into India by nomads from some outside region, perhaps from Central Asia, or the Arctic, or southeastern Europe (no one really knows) has been systematically dismantled in several recent scholarly studies. See especially Edwin F. Bryant, The Quest for the Origins of Vedic Culture: The Indo-Aryan Migration Debate (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) and Klaus Klostermaier, A Survey of Hinduism (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).

[47] This is in the Satvata-tantra, which is quoted in Bhagavad Gita as It Is, 7.4 purport

[48] Chaitanya Charitamrita, Adi-lila, 17.12 purport.

[49] Srimad Bhagavatam 5.19.9, purport.

[50] See Smita Mitra, “Krishna (b. July 21, 3228 BC),” in Outlook (September 13, 2004), available at www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?225095.

[51] Skanda Purana, Utkal Khanda 58.

[52] John Moffitt, Journey to Gorakhpur: An Encounter with Christ Beyond Christianity (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1972), pp. 129, 135-136.

[53] See Nityananda Dasa, Prema-vilasa, Chapter 13, Ramanarayana Vidyaratna ed. (Murshidabad: Haribhakti Pradayini Sabha, 1298 BS), Bengali. For an alternate version of the book distribution story, see Narahari Chakravarti, Bhakti-ratnakara (Kolkata: Gaudiya Mission, 1986), Bengali.

[54] The author would like to acknowledge the research of Madhavananda Dasa in compiling scriptural references to the maha-mantra.

[55] A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, “On Chanting Hare Krishna, in Back to Godhead no. 7 (February 1, 1967).

[56] Originally published in Integral Yoga Magazine (Winter 2009).

[57] Francis Crick, The Astonishing Hypothesis: The Scientific Search for the Soul (New York: Scribner, 1994), p. 3.

[58] Letter from Allahabad dated January 20, 1971. It was reproduced in two of Prabhupada’s books, Coming Back and The Science of Self-Realization.

[59] O. B. L. Kapoor, “Bhakti, the Perfect Science” in Back to Godhead, Vol. 1, No. 53 (March 1, 1973).

[60] Kapoor used this phrase in a personal conversation with me. Coincidentally, it is also used by Robert E. Wilkinson as the title of his enlightening 1996 article in which he analyzes Quantum Theory in relation to Vedic Cosmology. See Robert E. Wilkinson, “The

Quantum Brahman," available at SpiritWeb (www2.eu.spiritweb.org).

[61] O. B. L. Kapoor, "Bhakti, the Perfect Science."

[62] John Boslough, Stephen Hawking's Universe (New York: Avon Books, 1985), p. 114.

[63] Sir John Woodroffe (aka Arthur Avalon), Shakti and Shakta: Essays and Addresses on the Shakta Tantrashastra, 4th edition (Madras: Ganesh, 1951), p. 11.

[64] See Margaret Case, "Shakti," in Parabola: The Magazine of Myth and Tradition, Vol. 27, No. 4 (Winter 1992). The idea of "passion" as a balancing kind of force is interesting from a Star Wars perspective: the Jedi await a powerful messiah-like personality who, they say, will bring "balance" to the Force by his actions. See my own The Jedi in the Lotus: Star Wars and the Hindu Tradition (London: Arktos, 2010).

[65] For more on these three levels of God realization, see the Bhagavata Purana, Cantos One and Two. I elaborate on this issue as well in my work, The Hidden Glory of India (Sweden: The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 2002).

[66] Lecture on Srimad Bhagavatam 1.2.8 in New Vrindavana, September 6, 1972.

[67] From Krishna Consciousness: The Matchless Gift.

[68] From Krishna Consciousness: The Matchless Gift.

[69] From The Journey of Self-Discovery.

[70] This no longer appears in the Wikipedia entry for ISKCON.

[71] Bhaktivinoda Thakur, The Bhagavata, p. 23.

[72] Los Angeles Times, July 31, 1999.

[73] Time magazine, November 15, 1993.

[74] Originally published in Integral Yoga Magazine, Winter 2005.